AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Molly Larson Cook for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on July 23, 1996. Title: Geography and Other Stories.

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Marjorie Sandor

This thesis comprises a collection of six short stories written and developed in the Creative Writing program at Oregon State University and particularly in fiction workshops with Dr. Tracy Daugherty and Marjorie Sandor. These stories explore the human condition, and human connections, in contemporary society. The characters here are ordinary people struggling in small ways and large to find their bearings in a world where old maps are redrawn with perplexing frequency, landmarks disappear, and coordinates shift without warning.

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Geography and Other Stories

by

Molly Larson Cook

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Molly Larson Cook, Author

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This collection of stories is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Jim Nattinger, who would have been here if he could, and to the jazz and blues musicians around the Willamette Valley who played the music while I wrote the words, especially George Edmonston, who taught me the difference between a front beat and a back beat; Mark Lichtenthaler and the guys, who believed I really could write a book; and, most especially, John Stowell, who turned the Oregon rain into a rainbow.

Moving to the Country

They are happy to be leaving the city. Daniel is happier than Maggie perhaps, but both of them are ready for the change. For three months, since Richard, a young blond junkie with a surprisingly sweet voice, broke into their apartment, they've been deciding what to do. Their departure at least signals resolution, a firm step toward something. They know Richard's name because of the police business. He lived a dozen blocks away from them, up off West End Avenue, practically a neighbor, although holding a knife to Daniel's throat in the middle of the night was hardly a neighborly act.

Their friends in the city have mixed feelings. They understand all the reasons for going, agree with them, of course--the noise, the high cost of living, the crime. Especially the crime. Their friends just aren't sure about the going itself. Some people need the city more than they fear it, people like Mr. Pleskaya, Daniel's elderly piano teacher. Daniel and Maggie's parents, who live outside Manhattan's magnetic field in places where they hear only the bad news (although Daniel and Maggie spared them Richard) are relieved. Daniel's grown children think whatever he does is fine. The truth is, Maggie knows, the children are miles from Daniel in every way and would be concerned only if she and Daniel decided to move in with one of them. There's no chance this would ever happen, of course, but Maggie

supposes it might cross their minds once in a while the same way the prospect of her parents, or Daniel's, moving in with them occasionally crosses hers.

The three rooms they've occupied on West 72nd Street are filled with boxes, their few pieces of good furniture, and Daniel's baby grand piano, which came with them all the way from Seattle. The piano was a gift to himself four years ago when he turned fifty, to make up for a flock of losses, he'd laughed, a more unruly flock, it seemed, than Maggie's presence could compensate for. He's still learning to play.

When they'd decided to come East, Daniel couldn't bear to leave the piano behind even though everyone told him that a cross-country move is never easy on a delicate instrument. He loves the dark curves and the red felt and polished brass inside. "This is more than a piano," he'd told Maggie the day it was delivered, but she could already see that in his eyes and the way he stroked the wood.

"My red sports car," he'd laughed. "My twenty-year-old bimbo." She'd felt a twinge at that one, seeing as how there had *been* a bimbo--or at least a young interior designer--sometime before Maggie, while he was still with his first wife. Maggie had wondered if old habits lingered, but it was a fleeting thought even as she acknowledged that the two of them, wife and designer, must surely be counted among Daniel's losses.

Maggie thought the piano might keep him in the city if anything could.

"I never wanted to be an architect, you know," he'd told her. "I wanted to play the piano." Daniel doesn't play well, but he relished his lessons with Pleskaya from the Metropolitan, Pleskaya, man of a thousand stories, posters, lessons, just the

kind of person Daniel talked of meeting in New York, but Daniel has given up on a lot of things the last few months, and even Pleskaya couldn't pull him back.

"Daniel," he'd said, rubbing Daniel's shoulder with his big hand the last time they saw him. "It's the city. These things happen. Thank God you are alive, thank God you are both alive to tell the story, and go on. Don't let the city swallow you whole." But Daniel had pulled away from Pleskaya, flinching just a little at his touch, and Maggie knew it was too late, that Daniel was already going down.

Maggie can't believe how much is here. Neither can the moving man they've hired for a miraculous flat fee. She thinks he suspects they added things after he came to look two weeks ago. She tries to assure him they are as surprised as he is. "I don't know," he says and shakes his head as his young helper loads boxes onto a hand truck.

"We should have had a sale," she told Daniel last night. They were counting the boxes, their insurance against loss between here and there. Daniel insisted on it.

"This is Manhattan," he pointed out. "Anything can happen here." True enough. "These moving guys could be anybody. They could drive someplace and sell our stuff."

"Unlikely, Daniel," she told him. "Nobody wants our towels and dishes and books and records." Or your memorabilia, she wanted to add, things that had suddenly become even more valuable to him.

"No more losses," was all he said. "No more."

Maggie travels light, prides herself on it, but Daniel holds onto things. He still has sweaters from junior high school, ten years of architectural magazines, and most of the ties he's ever owned.

"Why are we keeping all this?" she'd asked him when they moved across the country. "It's costing a fortune to ship it, you know." He hadn't answered, just walked through their rooms, straightening the stacks of cartons so the edges were all squared with each other. She hadn't pushed it. Somebody might hijack the piano, Maggie thinks, but nothing in those boxes.

"Where did we put all this in these three rooms?" Daniel asks now.

He knows as well as Maggie does: stuffed in the one big closet, crammed onto shelves and in cupboards, stacked under the king-size bed and against the wall, the room so crowded they had to turn sideways to get to the dresser. Now, in the dozens of cartons they've scrounged from the delis and liquor stores on Broadway for the past month.

"Just think of all the space we'll have," he says, watching the place get empty. "A whole room just for the piano." But Maggie's not watching. She's looking out the window at the Empire State Building and the RCA sign and the roof gardens on the brownstones in the next block. The leaves on the small trees are just beginning to turn color, and the planters are filled with bright chrysanthemums instead of the summer flowers that were there two weeks ago.

For a month now, Daniel's been thinking of the big house they've rented in the seaside village miles and miles north of Manhattan. "I can't wait," he declares. "By tonight we'll be home." He'd said the same thing three years ago, the night

before they drove across the Hudson into New York. "Tomorrow night we'll be home, Maggie," he'd said. "New York, New York. We'll make it there. We will." Given his offer from the prestigious design firm in mid-town, the possibilities had looked good.

The movers begin dismantling the piano, and he gives their work his full attention. "I hate this part," he says, watching their every move.

When Daniel and Maggie arrive in the late afternoon to claim the place, the owners meet them with keys and last minute bits of information. The owners live in Brookline and won't be around to keep an eye on things. "Besides," they say, "it's your place now. We're not the kind who check up all the time." This is a small town, and Maggie's sure the owners will hear plenty about them anyway.

The house is a bold contemporary unlike anything else here, something they didn't expect to find. The living room seems endless to Maggie after the apartment, and a wall of windows on the south side overlooks a deep quarry lake flanked by sheer granite. The brown carpet is as drab as she remembers from the day they first looked at it. The furnishings, which are included, are an unholy collection of decrepit antiques with Danish modern pieces filling in the gaps.

"Those old things have Plymouth Rock written all over them," Maggie had told Daniel driving back to New York that first day.

Now, she realizes it's even worse, antiques mixed with avocado greens and turquoise. Somehow Daniel, who has always favored black and white contemporary Italian, doesn't seem to mind.

"Just don't let the pipes freeze," the owner is saying. "They froze in January and made a pretty nasty mess. I hate to be hard-nosed about it," he says apologetically, "but I'm afraid you'll have to be responsible for any damage from freezing." Maggie's calculating the heating bill for this big, open place and hoping for a mild winter.

"The plumber and electrician know the house inside out. There's a list of numbers by the phone. And if there's anything you can't use," he says, waving his hand around the living room, "put it in the attic. Don't worry about the furniture. You can't hurt a thing." Maggie's not so sure. Looking at the antiques, she thinks she might want to rope them off with velvet cords just to be on the safe side. "We're happy to have you here. We want you to enjoy it."

Maggie knows the owners are also happy to have this couple from the city, because they're leaving the country for a long sabbatical. Maggie and Daniel have signed on for twenty-two months in what Daniel considers to be a real bargain at the winter rate. By then, he'd said with a confidence Maggie didn't quite believe, they'll find something to buy. And they're paying less for a whole house, Daniel had pointed out, than their three rooms on 72nd Street. But that was Manhattan, Maggie reminded him, and this is Pigeon Cove.

She'd wanted to tell him they were paying for more than square footage in the city. They were paying for walks through Central Park and jazz in the Village. They were paying for the Natural History Museum and twenty different Chinese restaurants--all good, all within walking distance. She didn't tell him, though, because Daniel would have told her the price was too high, that they were paying for

Richard and his knife, too. His voice would have started to rise and his hands would have become fists, opening and closing until he shoved them into his pants pockets to make them stop, and he would have looked at her in that new way, afraid and ashamed of his fear. She would have had to put her hands on his shoulders then and tell him they were doing the right thing, going.

Across the road, the old quarry office and the company store still stand, small granite buildings that look like miniature banks, Maggie thinks, banks that will never fail. The hillside beyond the lake is thick with woods just starting to turn color. Up the road a few hundred yards is their swimming hole, another quarry walled with granite. "Private swimming pond," the ad for the house had read, alerting Maggie to privilege in the neighborhood. Across the road to the east, past the miniature banks, is the blue sea Daniel was longing to be near. Cleansing, he'd said, the sea will be cleansing. The eagerness is in his voice now as they conclude the financial arrangements. It never goes. Maggie hears it and doesn't hear it like she heard the traffic at first in Manhattan and then didn't hear it under all the other noise.

"This place is everything we want," he'd said the day they found it. He was wrong. It was everything he wanted. She was happy to stay in the city, would have been if it hadn't been so hard for him. What he meant was that he'd sleep again here, quietly, without waking up in a sweat. He'd believe that a sound in the night was just the floor settling and not a madman with a knife.

"You don't see things," he'd said, "not like I do. We're just damned lucky to be alive." He was right. She doesn't see things like he does, and they are lucky

that Richard had decided, finally, to take the cash and get out.

When they've finished with the details, Maggie and Daniel's names on the lease, the keys in Daniel's pocket, the new landlord and his wife invite them out for chowder. They're on a first name basis now, and Julia and Frank offer to show them their favorite places. On the way to the village square, in the back of Frank's Toyota, in the dark, Daniel puts his arm around Maggie and squeezes her shoulder.

"This is the public beach," Frank says, pointing through the still warm dusk. Maggie can smell ripe seaweed as they pass. "And the bandstand. Concerts every Friday night in summer." Daniel hugs her shoulder again, but she's thinking about summer concerts at Lincoln Center, the crowds of kids and families and old couples in the dark, listening to the music while jet planes criss-crossed the night sky over the graceful white dome of the band shell. This is September. They're too late for concerts here.

"There's the nicest inn in town," Julia says as they pass a gabled white house with a broad, beautifully trimmed lawn running toward the water. "Ralph Waldo Emerson stayed there. If you have special guests, this is the place for them to stay." Daniel thinks the place for special guests to stay is their place. He says he's ready for company, lots of it, people all the time--children, family, friends, everyone who never visited their three rooms in New York. "It will be great," he says. "That house was just meant for people." Friends in the city have promised to come, but it never works that way, Maggie knows. People are busy, and the promises fade.

When they're back in the driveway, Julia stays in the car while Frank stands beside it, his door open, and cautions them about the quarry lake in front, the edge

eight feet from the driveway. He tells them about the three young people drowned in recent history. "One of the bodies never recovered," he says, shaking his head mournfully. On that note, he leaves Maggie and Daniel to get ready for sleep in a strange bed. Theirs will not arrive until tomorrow.

Daniel stands in his blue boxer shorts at one of the two sinks in the big bathroom, brushing his teeth, humming through the foam. Maggie wanders through the dark house twice trying to feel like she belongs here, trying to understand her edginess and some other feeling close to anger. As she pauses to watch Daniel brush, he turns his head just a little and winks at her, but she can't wink back. He finishes, rinses the toothbrush and carefully puts it into its plastic holder, snapping the lid shut tight. She turns away, deciding whether or not to take off her clothes in front of all this strangeness, and finally sheds her jeans. She pulls her t-shirt up to unfasten her bra, but she wants her t-shirt and panties on tonight, things she put on this morning in New York.

In the confusion of the day, they've forgotten to bring sheets, so they lie on the mattress pad with their black and white comforter thrown on top. Daniel lies with his hands behind his head and asks if she can believe it.

"Believe what?" she asks him, tired and wishing for sheets.

"Going out for dinner with the landlord. Sitting down and talking, laughing, you know. Like we're just *people*."

"We *are* just people," she tells him.

"That's what I mean," he says. "Can you imagine doing that in New York? Going out for dinner with that asshole from the management company?"

"No," she has to laugh, thinking of Daniel's last conversation with the asshole and the argument over their security deposit. "I cannot imagine going for dinner with anyone from the management company." She knows he's grasping for any sign of welcome, safety. She doesn't blame him, but the grasping makes her afraid of what will happen if he's disappointed.

"These people are *nice*," he says. "Almost like Seattle."

"They're just people," she tells him again. "And there were plenty of assholes in Seattle."

Maggie thinks she's grown tougher than Daniel, or maybe New York was his ultimate challenge. He loves cities--has before now--and she was the one who talked about buying a farm. But things shifted in New York. She liked the edge and the grit. She began to feel like someone she hadn't known before but recognized right away--and liked. She'd gone to work, made friends, and forgiven all but the worst of the terrible things about the city. Daniel was the one who came to need the sea, space, something cleaner.

"I thought you hated colonial stuff," she'd told him. "Frank Lloyd Wright would gag."

"People change," he'd said, and she couldn't argue the point.

Maggie knew they'd leave New York after Richard, but she didn't know how far they'd have to go. Over a long weekend in June, while they were trying to put the pieces back together, they'd driven to Rhode Island with friends. Back in the city late Sunday night, they'd dropped their friends off at their co-op in the East

Village. The streets were filled with the people you see there twenty four hours a day--hookers, junkies, kids on the run. They'd seen them all before, but after a quiet weekend by the sea, it hit Daniel hard. Then he'd made a wrong turn, and they'd ended up on a little side street, blocked for a few moments by young men in cars at either end, maybe thinking Daniel and Maggie were someone else. Daniel had started to shake, gripping the steering wheel and saying over and over: "This is it, this is it, Maggie, I can't live here anymore." That night, he hadn't dropped her off at the apartment like he usually did. She'd gone with him to park the car in the lot on 42nd Street, and they'd taken a cab home together, both of them quiet, holding hands in the darkness of the back seat.

Daniel turns out the light, and Maggie feels the unfamiliarity of the room fully in the dark. They're silent and look out the window at the stars.

"How long has it been since we've seen stars like this?" Daniel asks, raising himself up on one elbow for a better look. He's wearing nothing, and his body is painted silver by the light. He seems as unfamiliar to her as the rug and the bed. Maggie feels an urge to touch him, but she holds back.

He's right. They did not see stars like this in New York. She'd forgotten how many there are, how thick the Milky Way, how clear the patterns. From the roof of their building she could see the three stars of Orion's belt sometimes over the Chrysler Building or New Jersey while she smoked her last cigarette for the night. When she'd gone out on the deck tonight before bed, she'd seen Orion complete, and Cassiopeia, and two other constellations she recognized but could not name.

"Listen," Daniel says suddenly.

Maggie turns and listens, alert, her hand on his arm, hoping they are all right. She hears nothing and tells him so.

"That's it," he sighs. "That's it exactly--nothing. Isn't it wonderful?" The quiet delights him. She feels uncomfortable surrounded by all this nothing. Maybe they should have gone back to Seattle. At least it was familiar. "Boston," Daniel had said. "We don't want to move all the way across the country again."

"But Boston is a city, too," she'd told him. "Maybe you'll get tired of it, like New York." Tired is not what she meant, but she couldn't say the word "afraid" to him. He's her husband.

"Let's make this place ours," Daniel says, pulling her into his arms. She is surprised by his touch, by the way his body relaxes as it has not since Richard. He strokes her hair, her arm, her belly. He slips his hand under her panties and pulls them away. Something in her wants to resist, but that's the one thing she must not do to him.

In the morning, the movers come with their things, and they agree with Daniel.

"Great place," Walt says. They're on a first name basis with the movers now, too. "No wonder you wanted to get out. You're lucky, buddy." His helper, Rick, who's never been out of Manhattan, is overwhelmed. He stares out the windows at the woods and the quarry lake until Walt tells him to haul ass, reminds him they're not getting paid by the hour.

"Anyway," Rick says, "I'll bet that lake is deep."

After Walt and Rick reassemble the piano and head back to Manhattan with cash in hand, Daniel insists that they leave the boxes and walk to town. He's eager to survey his new territory, the village and its narrow streets set out beside the sea.

"Quintessential," he says as they go, "quintessential New England."

"You've been reading the brochures," she laughs.

"Doesn't it remind you of the pictures in your story books when you were a little girl?" It does, but she doesn't want to admit it, and she can't quite say why. This move has uncovered a tiny vein of meanness that surprises and fascinates her. This afternoon when Daniel wasn't looking, when he was outside wishing Walt and Rick a safe trip home, she'd made a tiny scratch in the glossy, dark finish of the piano, down near the pedals where he wouldn't notice it for a long time. Maybe never.

Maggie and Daniel walk all the way through town to the end of the Neck, a wide strip of land, a jetty really, extending into the sea, lined with little shops and galleries. She notices how pale he looks next to the tourists who are still busy spending money, as if he's been indoors for months. He moves not slowly, but with an odd new step, placing each foot firmly and flatly down as he goes. Small boats tied to the old wooden piers bob gently in the wake of a sailboat going by. In the sunlight of early fall, the sea is a deep blue Maggie's never seen before. Daniel is right, she admits. This is quintessential. They've traveled light years overnight from New York to this place.

Daniel likes the village and the sea, but it's the churches he likes best, especially the big white frame building with the cannon ball stuck in the bell tower, a remnant of the Revolutionary War, according to Frank. Who are they to disbelieve this history? Surely not Daniel. He believed in New York until Richard. He'll believe in this place, too, Maggie knows.

"The churches just say *home* to me," he says. "Come, ye faithful people, and all that. Remember?"

"Does this mean we have to start going?" she asks. She's teasing him. He hasn't set foot in a church in years.

But then he says, "It wouldn't hurt," and something in his voice makes her think he's not entirely joking.

The second day they stay inside and empty all the boxes. The responsibility for getting rid of them is entirely theirs. No super here to haul them to the sidewalk. "No sidewalk," Daniel exults, laughing and pleased. They spend an hour cutting the boxes up and flattening them and tying them for the dump. When Maggie goes outside for a cigarette, Daniel takes a break, too, and she hears Mozart from the house, played in his slow, painstaking way. Daniel approaches the piano like an engineer, Maggie thinks, not an architect, every note in its place, clean, correct. The music stops mid-phrase, and Maggie holds her breath waiting for the angry crash of Daniel's hands on the keys, the sound she'd heard again and again in New York after Richard. Instead he plays a slow, jazzy riff on the Mozart and goes

on to finish the piece this way. Maggie listens, trying to read the message in this, as she watches a pair of ducks loop over the quarry pond and settle slowly on the water.

Daniel comes out of the house and stands on the deck with his hands in his back pockets, inhaling deeply. "Smell that air," he says.

"For God's sake, Daniel," Maggie snaps, forgetting the Mozart, "there was air in New York." She thinks of the thick, hazy August air that smelled a lot like ripe seaweed and wishes she could feel it sting her throat right this minute. He turns away, and she hopes he's not shaking. She's afraid she'll say something worse if he's shaking. He can't do that, not here, not after all his promises.

"This is not Paradise," she tells him, trying to keep the bite out of her voice. "It's a little town in Massachusetts. A village. It's picturesque as hell, and I know you like it, but I miss the city."

Daniel looks at her, and she puts her hand out to him.

"Are you sorry we came?" he asks carefully, taking her hand.

"No," she says, telling the truth. "I'm not sorry. I'll get used to it." She's not so sure about that part. She's already thinking about a trip back. She could take the train from Boston, go by herself, maybe as soon as next month. She imagines the train pulling into Manhattan, dropping down under the rain-slick autumn streets, into the steamy grit of Penn Station. She sees herself coming up the stairs into the bright craziness of that place and walking out the door to the streams of yellow taxis on Seventh Avenue.

"Penny," Daniel says, still careful. She looks at him. "For your thoughts. Something's making you smile." He smiles, too, but she shakes her head and tells him it's nothing. She doesn't want to let him into her fantasy. It's the one place she's safe from his fear and from the terror of her own quiet pleading with Richard that night.

"Please, please," she kept saying, her tears in silent, wet tracks down her cheeks. "Please. Take what you want, but don't hurt him. Don't hurt my husband."

Their friends thought Maggie would be the one to suffer most from it, a man in their bedroom, a knife, wild threats and crazy eyes, but it turned out to be Daniel's nightmare more than hers.

"It could have been worse," their friends told her. "You're lucky he didn't rape you." But it wasn't Maggie that Richard wanted. She'd watched them--the man she loved and the crazy, beautiful boy with his knife.

"Don't call anybody," Richard had told her sweetly, while he pinned Daniel and drew a tiny line of blood on Daniel's cheek with the knife. "Stay right where you are." And she had stayed, pleading, helpless, while Richard struggled to complete the act, but failed and ended it with a stream of obscenities, leaving through the front door of the apartment with the cash, slashing at things as he went. After he was gone, Daniel had grabbed her hard and made her promise not to tell.

"He hurt you," she'd wept. "We have to tell somebody. We have to tell the police." But he'd held her arm hard, weeping too, and made her promise she would not.

"He had a knife, Daniel. He was crazy. How could you stop him? How could either of us stop him?"

"Just don't tell," he'd said fiercely, shaking her arm hard, "not that part." He'd taken a long shower, and then they'd sat up until morning watching the room change with the light, not talking, and Daniel would not let her touch him at all. Later that morning Maggie had called the police to report the robbery and give a description of Richard, but she hadn't told the rest.

The third day they have things to do and errands to run before Daniel starts his job in Boston. Find a supply of fireplace wood, for one, since Maggie has vetoed the idea of cutting their own. Daniel's disappointed, she thinks, that they are not turning into settlers here. She thinks he believed that the fresh air and rustic setting would transform them, but he's still an architect, and she's still more interested in finding a job in Boston than homesteading.

They make their way to the bank, the town hall, the motor vehicles office, the little public library. Daniel is especially keen to do it right away. He wants to shed the old life as soon as possible, Maggie knows, complete the change. He wants to be free of the city, all of it. He wants the old license plates off the car, the new library card in his wallet.

"They don't even use a computer there," he says happily as they walk down the granite steps of the library. "Did you see that? They *write* your number on the cards. Isn't that great?" Somehow, it is, but while she's agreeing with him, she's

remembering the big stone lions and the broad marble steps of the Library on Fifth Avenue. She also knows that Daniel loves computers.

Their last stop is the police station where they are officially recorded and receive their permit for the town dump and the residents-only parking lots.

"A little provincial," Maggie says before they go in.

"It's because of the summer people," Daniel tells her. "When they come, there's no room for us." Maggie hears him say "us" as if he's lived here for years. Daniel's need to adapt is like a chameleon's. Three days on this new planet and he's breathing like a native.

"I'm a country boy," he says by way of explanation, and grins and tips an imaginary cowboy hat to her. It's true in a way. He was born in the country, a small town in Montana, but she's only known him in the city, smaller cities than New York before, but always cities. She's never known the country boy he remembers himself to be now.

At the police station, the officer in charge fills out a form and hands over the sticker for their car. He makes sparse conversation, asks where they're from.

"New York," Maggie tells him.

"Seattle, really," Daniel says quickly, riding over her. "We just *lived* in New York for a couple of years."

Out on the sidewalk she asks him about it.

"Why did you tell him we're from Seattle?"

"We *are* from Seattle," he says.

"But we left three years ago. What's wrong with saying New York?"

"I don't want people to know. I don't want them to hate us."

"They won't hate us because we're from New York."

"They will. Everybody does."

In the late afternoon, while Daniel makes calls to find firewood, Maggie drives to the Mobil station on the edge of town for gas, and air for the tires. It's not the self-service she expected, so she waits in the car, window rolled down, for the attendant. Two young men are fooling around inside the garage. She can see them jostling each other like a couple of twelve-year-olds. They know she's waiting, but they're reluctant to give up the game. Then she sees the taller of them look at the license plate Daniel has not yet changed. "Hey, Eddie," he calls. "You better wait on your customer. She's a Noo Yawker!"

They both laugh, and she suddenly feels a tiny thrill of fear run up her neck like she did one summer evening walking home alone through Central Park, the sky still light, but the crowds already gone.

"Yeah," Eddie says, tucking in his shirt and walking slowly toward the car. "City folks are always in a rush."

Daniel's right, she thinks. They hate us. Then the boy smiles in what looks like genuine friendliness.

"Movin' in?" he asks as he washes the windshield, pointing to the parking sticker with today's date. She nods. "Nice place," he says. "My folks moved up from New Jersey last year. You'll get used to it."

The sun is setting as Maggie pulls into the long driveway from the road. The lights are on in the house, and she can see Daniel inside, opening and closing cupboards in the kitchen, getting something from the refrigerator. She parks the car and gets out and stands looking at a deep blue Maxfield Parrish sky. She lights a cigarette and inhales a curious mixture of sweet sea air and nicotine in one breath. The still water of the quarry lake is eerie in this light, and she's swept with a rush of apprehension, remembering Frank's story of the drownings. She imagines the long driveway in winter, so close to the edge, slippery, covered with inches of ice and snow. Is this place a mistake? Have they made a terrible mistake?

She looks south toward where she thinks Manhattan might lie and imagines evening coming on in the city. She sees the taxis and the shops, the crowds, the lights. She feels the craziness and excitement and the risk. She looks back at the silent lake and watches as the surface fills with the reflection of sky and clouds, building now with streaks of red. She tries to remember--is it red in the morning or red at night for good sailing?

The evening star has risen just above the horizon, not yet touched by the gray moving in. She looks back toward the sea and the village. She can just make out the bell tower of the church Daniel likes. A crescent moon appears briefly from behind the clouds. The trees, still shaped with leaves, are silhouetted against the changing light. Another star comes out, and she remembers now, red at night, sailor's delight. She shivers in the cool evening air, wraps one arm around herself, and takes a step back from the quarry's edge. Through an open window of the house, she hears the piano--one of the Bach Partitas, Daniel's favorite, and the one

he plays the best. The clear and ordered notes break the silence, rippling out from under his steady, careful hands.

She keeps her eyes on the stars, and in her heart she says a prayer, a strange sort of thing, partly, she knows, because it's been so long since she has formed one, but more because of the mixture of joy and longing and uncertainty and thanks it seems to be.

Tuesday Afternoon

"That kid hung the goddamned chicken."

Eleanor Carey shakes her head slowly when she hears this and makes a *tsking* sound with her tongue against her teeth. Buck is telling her a story about a boy he knew a long time ago, and he's trying to get a rise out of her the way he does sometimes. Buck is sitting in one of Mrs. Carey's white plastic lawn chairs on the cement patio behind her house. The moss baskets of fuschias and yellow begonias hanging under the eaves are dripping just a little because Buck watered them not fifteen minutes ago. He's drinking a glass of iced tea from the pitcher that sits sweating on the plastic table between them. Half an hour ago, Buck finished mowing Mrs. Carey's lawn like he does every Tuesday from May to October and pulling weeds out of her flower beds like he does every other Tuesday during the summer. Mrs. Carey is ninety-six years old, too old to do these things herself now, but she likes the yard kept up and besides, she enjoys seeing Buck pull into the driveway every week in his battered old pick-up, unload the lawnmower from the back, and bend to the work in her yard. Buck is almost seventy himself, but he's wiry and strong, and he's got a good sense of humor. Mrs. Carey likes that. What she likes best, though, is having iced tea with him on the patio and listening to him talk when he's finished the work. Buck has quite an imagination, and he's good with a story, like this thing about the chicken.

"It's true," he says. "He just didn't know what else to do there, a kid ten years old away from home for the first time. You can't have that bird in here, son.

That's what the doctor told him. It's got germs. I'm sorry, but you'll have to get rid of it." Buck says this in a gruff voice. Mrs. Carey likes the way Buck takes all the parts in his stories. "How? the kid asked him. That's up to you, son, probably best to just kill it." Buck takes a big swallow of iced tea and nods when Mrs. Carey holds up the pitcher, offering more.

"First those people from the farm gave him the chicken, and then a month later the doctor says he's not allowed to have it. No pets in the sanatorium, he says. Some people would say a chicken isn't much of a pet, a damned chicken, but it followed the kid around, and he liked it. A kid away from home, you know, a kid like that needs something." Mrs. Carey nods, but she doesn't say anything. She doesn't want to distract Buck from his story. She knows he's the boy in the story. He thinks he's fooling her, he always does, but she's an old woman. She's heard all kinds of stories, and she can tell truth from made up.

"I don't know what made me think about that chicken today," he says, slapping his red baseball cap against his knee. He's worn this same cap ever since he started doing Mrs. Carey's yard two years ago, and his sweat has made a dark, uneven band where the bill joins the cap. "Things just pop into a guy's head sometimes. That ever happen to you?" Mrs. Carey nods. She knows exactly what Buck means. Things pop into her head all the time these days, but they're mostly pieces of things, not the whole thing, like last week when she remembered a dress her daughter had worn once when she was a girl. Mrs. Carey remembered that dress, plain as day, right down to the ruffles around the sleeves, dark green velvet with white lace trim and the pearl buttons, everything about it, but she couldn't for

the life of her remember where her daughter had worn it. Someplace important, but she couldn't remember what it was. Mrs. Carey's daughter is old now, too, older than Buck, but she lives over in Pendleton and doesn't get to this side of the mountains much anymore. The grandchildren are gone, but they send cards and pictures that Mrs. Carey collects in a kitchen drawer.

"That sanatorium was nothing special, you know, just a place for puny kids to go and build up their red blood, at least that's what they told him, build up that old red blood, son, and you'll be playing football in no time at all." Buck laughs and swallows more iced tea. "That kid didn't even like football." Mrs. Carey can imagine a boy as slight built as Buck would have been too small for it.

"Before they turned it into a sanatorium that place was a fancy resort, you know, with the natural hot springs and steam baths and rich people from Portland and Boise coming to rest up and get better from whatever it was they had." Buck gives a little snort. "I guess having too much money could just wear a person out." Mrs. Carey smiles at this. She wouldn't know. "Those rich folks loved it, but the kid hated the place. Daytime wasn't so bad, you know, there were a lot of things to do during the day, but at night the only good thing was the stars." Mrs. Carey likes the stars, too. Even now, she comes out late sometimes to look at them. Her daughter tells her she's too old to be out at midnight by herself, but Mrs. Carey doesn't pay any attention to her.

Buck stretches his thin legs out in front of him. His blue jeans are almost white in places, and dirty now from the work, but he always has clean pants and shirt when he arrives. Mrs. Carey appreciates that. His work boots are badly

scuffed on the toes, but she knows that can't be helped. Mrs. Carey nudges the plate of store bought cookies a little toward him on the plastic table. She'd rather have home made to offer, but she doesn't cook the way she used to. She hopes Buck's not finished with the story. There's so much of the day left and not a lot to do by herself. She's glad when he takes a cookie and bites into it. A raisin falls onto his shirt, and he brushes it to the ground. A bird will find it later.

Mrs. Carey is happy to be sitting here on the patio with the smell of fresh-cut grass and Buck telling his stories. Sometimes he tells her about when he tried the rodeo for a while, and sometimes he tells her about the time he was in the Navy, and sometimes he tells her stories she thinks he's got mixed up with something else. She understands. She knows how hard it is to keep the things that really happened to you sorted out from things you think might have happened. Buck's chicken, for example. Maybe a boy would hang a chicken and maybe not. She doesn't care. She likes Buck, and he does a nice job with her yard. He takes another cookie, but he holds his hand under it this time, so no raisins drop onto his shirt.

"That chicken was just a little bit of a thing, couldn't have been more than a few days old, when Mr. Hawley brought it over. The Hawleys had the farm next door to the sanatorium, and they brought stuff to the kids--fresh strawberries and homemade fudge, that kind of thing. They were real nice folks. Made the kids feel like they had a family, you know, better than the one some of them had at home. Well, this particular day, Mr. Hawley had the chicken stuck in the front pocket of his overalls when he got there. He was unloading a crate of cherries and the chicken

kept poking his head out, looking around with those little black eyes. The kid just watched it. He'd never seen a chicken up close, not a live one anyway. Mr. Hawley saw him looking and reached in and pulled it out of his pocket. Here, he says, holding it out. This is Fred. You want him? The chicken didn't have feathers yet, you know, just yellow fuzz. He pecked the kid's hand, and the kid damn near dropped him." Here Buck smiles a little. "I don't know, the kid said. He handed the bird back to the old man and pulled his hand out of its reach. I don't know what to feed him. He wasn't sure he even wanted a chicken. I'll give you something, Mr. Hawley says. We'll fix you up. I can tell he likes you. So the kid kept him, but he didn't call him Fred. What kind of a name is that for a chicken?" Buck finishes his cookie and is silent for a moment. He cocks his head to one side like he's listening for something, but Mrs. Carey doesn't hear a thing.

"He tried to tell his sister about that chicken," Buck says, "but she never did believe the story. Nobody would hang a chicken, she'd tell him. Not even you. Anyway, the sister said, it was a *chicken*, for God's sake. Grandma used to wring her chicken's necks every week, and we ate them for Sunday dinner, she said. Who cares about a chicken? They were never that close, you know, the sister and the boy." Buck keeps his head turned away from Mrs. Carey. He rubs a rough place on his elbow and picks at something on his arm right below the shirt sleeve, a scratch from a rose thorn maybe or a mosquito bite, Mrs. Carey can't tell from where she's sitting.

"Anyway, the kid waited around all day hoping Mr. Hawley would show up, so he could give the chicken back. He tried making it fly up in a tree or over the

fence, but it was too dumb or maybe too little. He didn't want to have to kill it, but the chicken wouldn't go. It stayed right by the kid making the little noise it always made in its throat." Buck tries to make the noise for Mrs. Carey, but the sound is strange, an old man trying to sound like a little chicken. "The bird was just starting to get his real feathers, brown and a little white, and those black eyes of his looked around at everything that moved. He walked funny, picking up one foot and then the other, you know, the way a chicken does." When she was a girl, Mrs. Carey's father had chickens, but she hadn't liked them much, especially the little banty roosters that chased her around the yard and pecked at her ankles.

"When it started to get dark outside, and all the kids went down for supper, the kid figured Mr. Hawley wasn't going to come by. He figured it was up to him, and Jesus, he felt bad about it." Buck looks over at Mrs. Carey. "Excuse me," he says. "I didn't mean anything by that." But Mrs. Carey waves her hand at him. She's been married. She's heard worse.

"The kid stayed in his room while the other boys were downstairs. He held the chicken in his hand and stroked its head for a while. He talked to it, and for a minute, he even thought about running away, but he knew they wouldn't get anyplace before they got caught. Finally, he had no choice, so he made a noose out of one of his shoelaces." Mrs. Carey can't picture exactly how a noose like that would look, but she can see a small boy's fingers trying to put it together. Still, she's not sure about this part of the story. "Ten years old all by himself in that place, he couldn't think up any other way. Then he put the shoelace around the bird's neck, but he had to do it mostly by feel, he was crying so hard." Mrs. Carey

would prefer to believe Buck was making this story up, but she doesn't think so. Not all of it anyway. Not the part about the sister. Mrs. Carey's met the sister.

"The problem was," and here Buck holds his hands out to demonstrate, "a little bird like that has no weight." Mrs. Carey sees the dirt under Buck's fingernails and in tiny cracks of his skin, dirt from her own garden, from all his hard work, and she sees the green stains, too, from the toughest weeds. She's never known him to wear gloves except the time he carried stone for the rock wall he built out in front. Her own hands are white now except for the brown spots she's always hated. The skin is loose, and her fingers are bent. She tucks her hands under her apron.

"Even when he dropped the shoelace from the rod in his closet, and the chicken was hanging there next to the kid's shirts and the clean pants his mother brought every week, even then it kept making that sound in its throat and flapping its wings and moving its feet like it was trying to swim. The boy wasn't sure what he ought to do. He wanted to change his mind and cut the chicken down, but he had no knife. No knives allowed in that place, not even a pocket knife to whittle a stick. So he tried to untie it, but the chicken wouldn't let him anywhere near. That bird went crazy, I'll tell you, pecking at him and flapping its wings, digging its claws into the kid's hands. And then all of a sudden the chicken let out a squawk that scared the hell out of the kid. Really loud, way too loud for a little bird like that, and it dropped a big mess all over the kid's shoe."

Mrs. Carey knows Buck won't say any more about the mess. Sometimes she thinks Buck believes she's lived in a glass box all these years and knows nothing

about shit or being mad or scared and doing things you'd never do on a better day. She wants to tell him different, but what would be the point now? She wants to tell him about things she did that nobody knew, things that made her ashamed and frightened of her own self and sad, the way he feels about his chicken.

"Right after that squawk, the chicken got real quiet. But he was still moving a little, and the kid couldn't stand it any more, so he went over," and here Buck's voice peters out. He hunches forward, his red cap draped over one knee, and takes a swallow of iced tea. He holds the glass in both hands and looks up like he's checking the begonias which Mrs. Carey thinks look particularly nice today. "So he went over, and he pulled the noose tight, and the chicken quit moving." Buck looks back down at his iced tea. "That boy just couldn't let the chicken keep suffering there." After a few moments, Buck sits up straight in his chair and puts his empty glass on the table. He stares off across the grass toward the line of cottonwood trees along the bank of the stream that runs through this part of town, and he wipes his hand across his forehead and up over his white crewcut.

"He sat up for a long time looking out the window at the stars, and then he wrapped the chicken up in one of his undershirts until he could bury it in the morning. He figured he'd catch hell from his mom when he came up missing an undershirt, but he didn't care. It was the least he could do."

Mrs. Carey has been thinking about her own death quite a lot these days, about how she might look laid out in the casket she and her daughter have already agreed on. She's put her funeral dress and shoes in a plastic bag in the closet with a

note. She doesn't want her daughter dressing her up in something that will make her look bad.

Buck turns his cap slowly around and around in his hands. "Hell of a deal," he says quietly, checking the begonias again. "The sister was wrong, you know. It wasn't the same as their Grandma wringing the necks of her chickens every Sunday, it wasn't the same at all."

Buck stands and pulls at the legs of his jeans, stuck to him just a little in the summer heat. Even out here on the patio, it's hot in the late afternoon. Mrs. Carey wants to tell Buck not to worry too much about these things, that the time will come when they all slide together like Thanksgiving dinner on a plate that's too small. But she doesn't think it would make a difference to him. Not now. These thoughts come to a person of their own accord. For example, the sound that chicken made. Mrs. Carey can imagine it. Mr. Carey made a sound like that when he died in St. Mary's hospital up on the hill. The sound surprised her and scared her, too, and that, along with the smell of his shit, had made her run out of the room. Nobody but the nurses knew she wasn't there when he died. Nobody but the nurses knew Mrs. Carey was in the ladies bathroom heaving her insides out and not sitting like a good wife beside the bed, holding his hand and speaking loving words.

Mrs. Carey reaches into her apron pocket for the twenty dollar bill to pay Buck for his work. She gives him an extra five for cleaning out the rose bed. He'd told her it was included, but Buck keeps her little garden nice, and she appreciates him after the problems she's had with younger people who didn't do half the work and wanted more money.

"Thanks," he says, shoving the folded bills into the little change pocket in his jeans. "You're a good lady. I set the sprinklers for you. All you have to do is turn the water on." Mrs. Carey thanks him for that and asks if he's sure he wouldn't like more iced tea or another cookie.

"I gotta go," he says and pulls his cap over his crewcut, holding the bill and lifting the hat twice just a little off his head before he lets it rest. "See you next week." Mrs. Carey looks forward to that, although she knows at this age, she might not be here another week. There's always that possibility; it's not up to her.

She walks with Buck around to the front of the house and watches as he climbs into his old truck. There are rusty spots in the green paint and dents in both fenders. The handle of the lawn mower sticks up in back. Mrs. Carey waves as the truck starts down the street. The zinnias and marigolds Buck planted in the side bed two months ago are bright in the late afternoon sun. The tiger lilies are better than ever this year, and Buck has the little privet hedge trimmed just the way she likes it. She turns to walk back to the patio, but she sees that Buck has pulled over to the curb in front of the Johansen place next door. She waits to find out what he's forgotten, his clippers maybe or the blue gasoline can for his mower, but he just sits there with the engine running, looking straight ahead, and then it seems to her that he puts his head down on the steering wheel, but with her tired old eyes, Mrs. Carey is never sure of these things.

Light Waves

The red MG sways low and easy taking sharp turns cut into the hillside along the narrow Oregon coast highway. For a moment, Charlie Archer imagines himself outside the car, watching from one of the houses up the bluff as he guides it smoothly through the curves. He likes the picture. He and the old car are a perfect match, he thinks, two tired cliches imparting a sense of quality going quietly but relentlessly to seed. A few years ago, he would have denied the thought, but then a few years ago, he'd expected to be spending his winters in the south of France, a totemic possibility that has seen him through countless dark moments. After the conversation with his friend, Dr. Zachary Kenyon, yesterday morning, however, he can cross the south of France off his list. Charlie Archer is fifty-four years old, and he's a dying man.

"We're all dying," he remembers saying over a beer a couple of years ago when a former colleague's cancer had been announced. "Stupid," he says to himself now. "A stupid remark."

Charlie glances out at the luminous white winter sky and then at the sea making long rolling strokes up the sand at the bottom of the hill, small currents and cross-currents rippling the water. Maybe if he could end things right here, right now, in this light--he imagines the little red car flying off the edge of the highway, tumbling over and over all the way down to the sea. But he isn't ready to try a trick like that. Besides, even a failed physics professor knows the car wouldn't have

enough momentum. The thick brush on the hillside would break the fall, and nothing would come of his act except more trouble.

The year he and Peggy had come here for Charlie's sabbatical, she'd teased him about his fascination with the light.

"You're going to wear yourself out, Doc," she'd laughed, using the name she'd given him the day his dissertation had been approved, "sitting there looking out the window." They'd walked on the beach every day, collecting agates and shells, a big glass float once that had broken loose from a Japanese fishing net. But he'd liked looking out the window best. Peggy had brought her tea and sat with him day after day, the two of them curled on the couch beside the fire, watching the sea and the sky, birds, tiny ships on the horizon, and now and then the spout of a gray whale.

A physicist should be interested in the light, he'd told her, but what he loved about it was nothing he could reckon with lines on a spectrum. Charlie had learned that year how time changes in this light. He'd found himself caught in the curve of languid weekdays with Peg, the weekends busier, time in its proper place, the light behaving. The weekdays were quiet, like brown birds bobbing on the water. But that was before Peg had moved here for good, before the girl, before it all went to hell.

The girl had not been worth it. He knew that now as he had almost certainly known it then, a girl with long brown hair and an incredibly limber body. She hadn't really been a girl, either, though she was young enough to have been his

daughter if he and Peg had had children. She was a graduate student, not one of his, but neither Peggy nor the Dean had been impressed with this fact. And her name--Cinnamon. A ridiculous name, something dreamed up by her back-to-nature parents, he'd had no doubt. She was dating one of his teaching assistants; they'd all gone to drink beer together a few times. And then she'd come to his office alone that unseasonably hot Saturday afternoon in late April when he was grading mid-terms.

"Just like the movies," she'd laughed as she pushed papers and books aside to sit on his desk, swinging her long, bare legs at first and then crossing them under herself in a lotus position. He'd meant to tell her to go, or to walk out of the room himself.

"Look," he'd said, "I'm married."

"I know," she'd laughed and dropped her head, letting her hair fall over her face and then whipping it back when she snapped her head up.

"Very happily married," he'd said emphasizing every word, but feeling himself get hard even as he said them.

"All the better," she'd laughed again. "I like the challenge." Charlie had not understood how some young women can want a man simply because he belongs to someone else. Or that the challenge was more exciting when the man was happy with his wife. Stealing an unhappy husband was no challenge at all.

Charlie had made it safely past his fiftieth birthday, even surrounded by attractive young women. He'd thought he was home free, no crazy stuff like he'd seen some of his friends go through, but that day with the girl, he'd stayed in the

room and locked the door. A few months later, she'd moved on, and Peggy had moved to the beach.

"I'm sorry, Peg. God, I'm so sorry," he'd said, panicky when she found the receipt for a double room at the conference he'd attended by himself. He'd denied everything at first, of course, feeling nausea rise in his chest as he did. Peg had said nothing while he lied, just stared at him, knowing, until finally he'd admitted taking the girl along. He'd agreed with her that he must have been crazy, that he was stupid, out of his mind, an asshole, a jerk, a complete shit. He'd agreed with whatever she said. "Just once," he'd lied when she asked. "It only happened once."

"I already know it happened more than once," she'd said. "The wives have stopped calling and when I run into them, they look at me like I've got a disease they feel terribly sorry about but are afraid they might catch. It was more than once."

"It didn't mean anything. Please, Peg. I love you." This much was true, but every time he'd moved toward her she'd backed away like a cornered animal.

"It meant something. I trusted you, Doc." She was the only one who ever used this name, but never after this night and never so quietly.

He'd felt light-headed and afraid he might faint. Peg had warned him at the beginning about her father's infidelities, how it was the one thing she wouldn't live with. "I blew it. Peggy, please. It will never happen again."

"While I sat at home by myself. Waiting."

"Peggy."

"You were fucking her." He knew how much she hated that word.

He'd tried to hold her, but she'd just stood there, wouldn't even sit down, just stood there with her hands out in front of her to ward him off, weeping, with a look on her face he could not forget. And then he'd heard a sound come out of her that terrified him, a wail that started low in her gut and rose up out of her throat, twisting her face. He imagined it might be the sound an animal would make, caught in a leg trap.

When it was over, that part of it, she'd built an enormous fire in the fireplace, a fire so big he'd thought she wanted to burn the house down. Then she'd dragged the big overstuffed chair up next to it, pushing him away when he'd tried to help her. She'd wrapped herself in a quilt and sat in front of the fire, staring, until he'd been afraid she might have gone catatonic. During the night, after the flames had turned to embers, he'd watched her move through the house, quietly shattering things: the tea pot he'd given her one Christmas, a beautiful Japanese fan he'd brought back from one of his trips, the glass in a framed picture of the two of them at Banff, things in every room. He hadn't stopped her. He'd hoped the breakage would be enough, but last night, alone at home with Zach Kenyon's news, in a body that had deceived him with its appearance of well-being, he'd done the same thing. For an hour, he'd bent himself to a frantic search and destroy mission--not methodical like her's, but random and noisy. After downing most of a fifth of Jack Daniels, he'd ranged through the place at midnight, ripping, throwing, crushing things as he went--books, records, a favorite sweater, a lamp. The lamp had stopped it. The couple in the apartment next door had pounded on the wall and yelled for him to be quiet. In the silence, shaking, weeping, he'd realized how

badly he'd misunderstood her grief that night, how poorly he'd calculated the savage effects of betrayal.

The next day, she'd packed two suitcases and gone without a word. He'd found the key holder for the beach cottage empty. Alone in the house, he'd discovered an antique glass vase that had been moved as if she'd thought to break it but changed her mind, and next to the fireplace, the edges charred, the copy of *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* he'd given her the first year they were married.

When he knew Peggy was gone for good, he'd spent a little more time with the girl, but her long legs did not help him forget Peggy's face. Two months later the girl had joined a group of students on a trip to Australia, but Peggy stayed at the coast. Shortly after that, the Dean had relieved him of his work with graduate students and reassigned him to large freshmen and sophomore lecture sections where he spent his time trying to interest anonymous young men and women in the wonders of physics beyond the laws of thermodynamics and chaos theory. The Dean had also suggested that Charlie might be grateful to have the job.

He and Peggy stayed in touch with notes or phone calls, an occasional brief visit--whatever was needed to take care of the business that holds married people in the same net: tax forms, decisions about the stocks they held, a new roof for the cottage. She even came back to the university now and then for formal occasions. She was always greeted warmly, but she kept a cool distance between herself and the wives who knew their story. They'd decided against divorce. Or rather, he'd decided. Peggy didn't care one way or the other.

"Divorce, no divorce, do what you want, Charlie. Just don't mention any of this to me again. No more apologies," she'd said. And she'd meant it. Once when he'd driven her to Newport for dinner and some music, he'd tried to broach the subject of getting back together. She'd pushed her chair back from their table by the window overlooking the docks, stood up without a word, gathered her purse and coat and walked out the door of the restaurant. She was three blocks away, walking fast, by the time he'd caught up with her, and when he'd tried to put his hand on her shoulder from behind, she'd wheeled on the spot and brought the back of her hand hard against his cheek. He'd raised his arm to dodge another blow, but when he saw the tears streaming down her own cheeks, he'd reached for her instead and she'd let him, but neither of them had spoken again while they drove back up the coast to the cottage except about some stock Charlie thought they should sell.

Charlie punches the buttons of the radio in the car, listening to brief snatches of music, talk, static. Farm report, top forty, country rock, local news, nothing. Whatever happened to the good stuff, music a guy could listen to? He punches the buttons one more time and starts to tell himself again to get the tape player fixed, but then he remembers Zach Kenyon and slams his hand hard against the dash.

Late last night, he'd called Peggy. He was scared, and he wanted to talk to her, but he wasn't ready to give her the news, not on the phone. He was still trying to make sense of it himself. Until yesterday when Zach showed him the X-rays, he'd thought the pain was an ulcer. He and Zach are more than doctor and patient; they've played golf for years and gone to basketball games and to the same parties.

Charlie imagines that Zach's wife, Barbara, might be one of the women who'd heard about the girl and looked sympathetically at Peggy. He's been in Zach's office dozens of times, and yesterday everything was the same--the black leather chairs, the golf trophies in the case behind his desk, the books, even the funny little framed drawing Charlie had given him one year illustrating the aerodynamics of a hook shot. Everything was the same, and everything was completely different.

"We should talk next week," Zach had told him. "Call if you need me before that. Anytime." He'd held Charlie by the shoulder. "Are you going to tell Peg? I can talk to her if you like." Charlie had told him no. Not yet. "Well, you know Barb and I are here for you, Charlie. For both of you."

On his way home from Zach's office, Charlie had remembered all those parties, the ones with plenty of liquor and conversation where sometime about two in the morning, with just the nucleus of the group left, somebody would ask, "If you knew you only had six months to live, what would you do?" And everybody would have answers, including Charlie. Run up my credit cards to the max and go sky diving. Sell everything, buy a sailboat and cruise around the world. Find some gorgeous babe and fuck her till my balls fell off. Find some gorgeous stud and fuck him till *his* balls fell off. Laughter, more drinks. "How about you, Charlie? What would you do?" "I'd go straight to the south of France," he'd always say without a moment's pause. "Jesus, Charlie," somebody would laugh, one of the other professors, or maybe Zach Kenyon, "don't you ever think of anything but the goddamn south of France?"

A stupid game. Nobody knows what they'll do until they hear the words for real. It's like speculating about life on other planets. Theories, a bunch of half-assed theories. Theoretically speaking, if he knew he was dying, he would head for the south of France, but last night it was the farthest thing from his mind. The only thing he was thinking about was Peggy. No, that was a lie. He'd been thinking about himself, that was the truth of it, thinking about how nice it would be to hear her say, "Come down, Charlie. Come to the coast. I'm here for you," like Zach and Barbara. But he didn't expect he'd hear it.

Peg had been cordial when they'd talked last night, but he could hear the tension in her voice as he usually did over the phone. She still guarded herself against him, a feeling he understood better now after looking in the mirror when he got home from the clinic. He'd seen his face, familiar, the same face he'd seen the day before, every day before this, but now there were secrets, things going on he'd known nothing about, and he was furious with the deception, helpless against it and lost. Talking to Peg, he'd had an image of her standing at the window of the cottage, looking out at the darkness toward the water, maybe at the stars if the clouds had broken, looping the phone cord around her hand the way she always did when she was anxious. When she'd asked how he was, he'd told her he was fine.

The highway descends quickly to a fork, and Charlie swings the car off onto the western prong and down a short broad curve to the single street running through the center of the village. To his right, up the steep hillside, an assortment of aging cottages--the one he still owns among them--compete with new houses, all glass and

cedar shakes, for a place in the lush green of ferns and blackberries and salal. In June, the Scotch broom will turn everything bright yellow.

To his left, toward the sea, the remnants of an abandoned resort stand slowly weathering into collapse--the tired little general store where Peggy works afternoons, the roller skating rink, a couple of wood frame motels operated from season to season by a series of hopeful owners. The place is ripe for development, everybody knows that; it's only a matter of time. Charlie has always said he didn't want to be around to see it. Now the old Chinese proverb has jumped up to bite him in the ass: Be careful of what you wish for, you may get it.

He makes a U-turn in front of the tavern at the end of the block, catching a glimpse of the sea as he does, and pulls up in front of the store. The MG is reflected in the window. Even faded, it makes a bright contrast to the gray-brown building, grayer now in the drizzle. In the rearview mirror, he can see the dark headlands fading quickly in the curtain of fog behind the rain.

Charlie sits in the car and inhales deeply through his nose, exhaling out his mouth in small explosions. The interior of the car fills with the stale smell of last night's Jack Daniels. He takes one more deep breath and then rolls the window down to let the chilly wet air drift in. He feels hot, but he knows it's not just the heavy jacket. Maybe this was a lousy idea, coming here, dropping in on Peggy. What's he going to say to her anyway? She doesn't owe him anything; he isn't her responsibility. But it wasn't an idea, damn it, it wasn't some harebrained *idea* he'd come up with, to run out of time and space. This is *it*. No more funny t-shirts that say "Carpe Diem" in fancy letters, no more jokes about last words or witty epitaphs

or Scarlett O'Hara thinking about things tomorrow. Christ, this *is* tomorrow. Charlie feels his stomach churning, and the memory of Peggy standing in the middle of the room with her hands out and the tears streaming down her face hits him with the force of winter surf. As he stands on the sidewalk, he looks up the hillside and wonders if Peggy might be looking down right this minute, might notice the little red car parked in front of the store. If she is, she'll expect the phone call. If not, well, he hopes it will be okay. Adele and Willie will be glad to see him, anyway. Adele and Willie own the store, and they were the first friends Charlie and Peg had made here. They'll want to know how he is, and Adele will give him a hug and let him use the phone in the back, and he'll call and invite Peggy to lunch. They can talk face to face, and maybe he'll be able to tell her.

The small overhead lights are on inside the store, but it seems dark as always, cavernous for such a small space, and empty except for Adele leaning on the counter at the back. But with his eyes adjusted to the light, Charlie sees that it's not Adele this morning; it's Peggy, reading a section of newspaper and drinking coffee. He stops, not sure whether to stay or run. He isn't ready to see her yet. He hasn't figured out what to say, and he was counting on the time with Adele and Willie to come up with something.

Peggy looks up from the paper at the sound of the little green plastic tide clocks banging against the windows of the door. "Doc?" she says like someone coming out of a dream. The name surprises them both. The corners of her mouth

start to turn up in what Charlie thinks is the beginning of a smile, but then drop as she pulls the familiar drape of distance across the space between them.

He nods to her, not trusting himself to speak, certain now that his decision to come down like this was all wrong.

"I was going to call you," he says. "I thought you'd be at home."

"I'm working mornings this week," she says. Charlie thinks she's going to say something more, but she stops. She looks down at the counter, then folds the newspaper neatly, smoothing out all the creases, before she looks up at him again. Charlie watches her hands and remembers the same movements when she'd straightened the sheets and blankets on their bed after lovemaking. She liked to sleep in a bed with smooth sheets, she'd told him. When he looked at her now, he could smell the muskiness of her body as she'd moved around the bed then, tugging, smoothing, tucking things in.

"Honey," he'd asked her once soon after they were married, "why can't we just collapse in a heap afterward like everybody else? We're supposed to smoke or fall asleep now, not do housekeeping."

"I like the bed smooth," she'd told him. "I like to mess it up and then smooth it out, so it's like we never did anything at all. Erase, erase," she'd said.

"You erasing me, Peggy?"

"I'm not erasing anything." She'd looked across the bed at him and smiled. "We used to say it when we were kids. You say something you don't mean and then you say, 'Erase, erase' and it doesn't count."

"Yeah. So what were you erasing?"

"Nothing, Doc," she'd laughed. She'd come around the end of the bed and leaned over him as he sat on the little chair next to the window, waiting to get back under the smooth covers. She'd held his head between her hands and then pulled it toward her breasts. Charlie remembered thinking it must feel nice to her, his thick hair warming her breasts. She'd pulled him up and led him to the bed where the sheet and blankets were turned down at a clean, sharp angle. Charlie had stopped at the side of the bed and scowled at her playfully.

"Where the hell's the mints?" he'd growled. "Fancy place like this oughta have mints."

She'd laughed again. "Kisses," she'd said. "we've got kisses."

He'd grabbed her then and wrestled her into the now neat bed. She'd squealed and said something foolish about not messing up the sheets. "Kisses," he'd said. "Yes, kisses."

When she finishes with the paper, Peg stands looking at him while he listens to the hum of the cooler motor, steady but catching every now and then, missing a beat.

"Willie needs to tune that thing up."

"Why didn't you tell me last night you were coming?"

"I didn't know myself until I woke up this morning."

"But it's the middle of the week. Is something wrong?"

"No. No, I just woke up and said, 'Charlie, my friend, you need a day at the coast.' So, I called in sick and gave everybody else the day off, too. One of

the privileges of old age." Even as he says it, he realizes it's the wrong thing to tell her--this lie about being sick even when it's the one true thing he's said.

She looks straight at him without smiling again. "We're not that old, Charlie."

"I know," he says. "I just wanted to come down and see how you were, walk around a little bit, look at the light." He smiles at her. She's right. They're not that old. In fact, she looks young in the jeans and sweater, even with the gray in her hair. No, not young, vulnerable, fragile like somebody who's been dying for years.

"The light," she says and nods. She smiles back at him, tentatively, just a little. The smile spreads cautiously to her eyes, and Charlie feels the answer to the question washing through him: What would you do if you knew you had six months to live? He'd want to court this woman again, gently, the way he had the first time. He'd want to see her laugh again without catching herself when she felt some piece of shrapnel strike a vital organ. He'd want to erase everything terrible between them before he tells her about the rest of it. Whatever might come of his efforts, he wouldn't want it to come out of pity.

"You look good," he says quietly as he watches her at the counter.

She shrugs and says softly. "For a woman my age." There's no bitterness in the observation, just truth.

"I mean it. You look great. I like your hair." She's cut it short since the last time he saw her, the way she wore it years ago, only now there's the gray in the soft curls.

"Thank you," she says, a little more formally now, the way she does whenever they start opening up too much. She can stop Charlie dead in the water with that formality. But Charlie doesn't flinch. And he doesn't push. Gently, he thinks. There's time. He feels himself growing quiet, calm. There's no need to rush.

He looks down into the old white enameled meat case next to the counter, taking inventory of the packages of meat and cheese neatly separated by crinkled green plastic dividers meant to look like parsley.

In the corner of the store, over what passes for a produce section, a large, dusty net is suspended from the ceiling, filled with pale glass floats, pieces of driftwood, dried starfish. This one also holds a cardboard mermaid with a necklace of shells over her breasts. He thinks about Peggy's breasts and the pink nipples he's kissed so often. Her nipples are small and harden only when she's aroused, always a dependable sign that his attentions were appreciated. He can make out the shape of her breasts under the loose navy blue sweater she has on, and he imagines the pink nipples. She's always been good at reading his mind. He wonders if she can tell what he's thinking now, and if it would please her at all. But this is not about sex. He just wants her whole again, like a spectrum with all the energies intact, before he's gone.

From where he stands at the counter, Charlie can see through the partly-opened door of Adele and Willie's apartment at the back of the store, into the cluttered living room. Through the picture window, he sees that the light has changed, the water darker now and the rain coming down hard. He can see Adele

with her back to him, in a big loose housedress, wiping off the top of the formica breakfast table and Willie sitting on the couch reading the paper. He's smoking a cigarette and drinking from a mug, coffee Charlie supposes, watching a television news program, and wearing his red, plaid bathrobe. The bathrobe gives the wintery scene a bright Norman Rockwell touch, Charlie thinks. Surely, there must be a fire blazing away in the fireplace on a day like this. Charlie can't can't see it from where he's standing, but he knows Norman would have included it. He imagines the scene framed and hanging in a white-walled gallery in the city: "Winter Morning by the Sea" the little card would read, Oil on canvas.

"Are you okay?" Peggy asks.

The question catches him off guard, his mind on the painting.

"I'm okay," he says, but he's suddenly afraid he's forgotten to shave this morning. "Do I look bad?" He touches his chin and is relieved to feel it smooth, surprised at how soft and pleasant his own skin feels.

"You look fine," she says. She puts her head down again and then brings it up quickly to face him with the kind of direct look he hasn't seen in years. She puts her hands in the back pockets of her jeans and turns to look out the window onto the street. He thinks she's angry that he dropped in on her like this. She pushes her bottom lip out a little and blows a strong breath of air upward, moving her curly bangs just a bit. He's seen her do this dozens of times when she's frustrated, or stymied by something, or when she doesn't want to cry--at movies or in arguments, once watching the phosphorescence on the water under the light of a full moon.

"How does it do that?" she'd asked, delighted at the eerie glow.

"Physics," Charlie had told her, standing at the window, holding her from behind. "Electromagnetic energy and a whole lot of excited little organisms in the water."

"That's not very romantic, Doc," she'd laughed. "That light is magic. Try again."

So he'd tried again and made up a story on the spot about a mermaid who'd fallen in love with Neptune and had left a beautiful glowing trail of phosphorescent scales to let him know where to find her.

"Ah," Peggy had sighed, relaxing into him, "much better." He'd pushed himself against her and crossed his arms over her breasts, cupping each one in a hand while they watched the light a little longer, until he felt her nipples stand up under her shirt and her bra.

While he's thinking of something else to say, Adele comes out of the apartment and spots him. She laughs out loud and holds her big arms straight out from her sides.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," she says in her deep voice, raspy from too much Jim Beam and too many unfiltered cigarettes. "For Lord's sake, it's the Professor. Come over here and let me give you a squeeze." Adele looks like a clown with her frowzy dyed red hair and her old pink slippers, but she looks good to Charlie, anyway.

"Oh, Charlie, you are a sight for sore eyes." She puts her arms around him and calls back over her shoulder. "Willie. Look who's here. Willie, turn off that TV and come out here. It's Charlie." Over her shoulder, Charlie sees Willie, thin and frail in his red bathrobe, get up stiffly from the couch and peer out at him. He doesn't come into the room, but waves from the doorway.

"Good to see you, Charlie," he says. "I can't come out. I'm in my skivvies."

"Nice to see you, Willie," Charlie waves back.

"What are you doing down here in the middle of the week?" Adele wants to know. "You win the lottery and quit your job?" But before he can answer, she goes right on. "Peggy, hon," she says, "lock up the till and come on back for some real coffee. You and Charlie come on in, and we'll visit. We haven't seen the Professor in a dog's age." Peggy doesn't move. "Come on, you two, I stole some doughnuts off my own shelf this morning. We'll have hot doughnuts and coffee." She laughs loudly at her joke. Still Peggy doesn't move. "Come on, honey, we'll hear the door if anybody comes in." Charlie knows it's not about the customers. He waits to let her take the lead. If she says no, he'll say no, too. She looks at him, and he looks back. They haven't been in Adele and Willie's apartment together for years.

"Oh, come on," Adele says in that deep voice. "You two can fuss at each other later. You've got plenty of time for that." She knows their story; Adele knows all the stories here. "Come on in and visit with the old folks. One of these

days, you'll be old folks, too, and you'll be happy for some company once in a while."

Charlie looks at Peggy, and she shrugs. "You're the boss," she says finally to Adele, who laughs with a growl at the idea.

"Now, that's more like it," she says, putting her big arm around Peggy like the wing of a great, loose-fleshed bird.

They walk through the door into the warm living room with the fireplace going just like Charlie imagined it. He unzips his jacket and pulls his arms out of the sleeves, swept with an unexpected feeling of grace. This is not it yet, this is not Charlie and Peg falling in love again, but this ordinary moment, the two of them here together with people who love them both, is a beginning, and it's enough. Out the window, the sea is dark green, almost black, and white foam sprays as the breakers slam into the shelf of sand between the offshore rocks. The waves hitting the rocks make wild fountains that shoot straight up into the air. Adele sets cups on the red formica table, and a plate of doughnuts covered with powdered sugar. They all pull their chairs up and sip the hot, strong coffee. Over the roar of the surf, and in the changing light, they talk.

Body Work

The body work was Arthur's idea. Arthur is my best friend, and he's helping me through this thing with Sam, so I thought the least I could do was give the body work a try. For the past two months, I've been here once a week at the Holistic Spirit Center getting myself pushed and pulled and whacked by a tiny woman named Starshine. It's not what I expected. When Arthur assured me that Starshine had the hands of a goddess, I pictured scented oils being slathered over me with gentle, soothing strokes that would of their own accord cause me to drop pounds of unwanted mass. They would give my winter skin a golden sheen and perhaps even make me a few inches taller. Arthur says I'm my own worst enemy when it comes to self-deception, but I blame it on an overactive imagination and dejection. I wanted to believe I'd walk away from these sessions a new woman in a slow, elegant gait, my hips slung slightly forward like a runway model answering to a name like Desiree or Sophia, not Beth as I have answered to my whole life except for a brief period in the ninth grade right after I saw My Fair Lady and insisted on being called Eliza.

Arthur says as soon as I'm through the transition phase with Sam everything will be fine, but that's what the vet told my father two days before our old border collie died. The thing with Sam isn't a transition anyway, it's just over--one more stop on that bumpy road to love Frank Sinatra sings about. I'm not listening to Frank Sinatra these days. Arthur insists that I hold off on old Blue Eyes until I'm out of the woods on this.

"You'll just make yourself miserable," he says. "You'll just wallow."

He offered to keep my albums at his place for the duration, and he also ragged on me one more time about not having a CD player. Arthur thinks I'm making a statement, but the thing is, I'm just a pre-CD woman. Those albums have traveled with me since my days in the dorm, and I still love to read the cover notes about how Frank and Nelson teamed up and which song is his favorite and why Frank is the swingin'-est cat around. I don't care that he's practically dead now and not swinging at all anymore. Arthur also says I'm an anachronism because nobody our age even listens to Frank Sinatra. I tell him the same thing about Judy Garland, but he says that's different.

I didn't expect to marry Sam except perhaps in that unconscious little part of my brain that's dishonest as hell about things like that until it's too late, but I didn't expect it would end like it did either. I admit he's not Mr. Put-Your-Arms-Around-Me-Honey-Hold-Me-Tight, but he's not a cold fish. He's reserved, a little fatherly even, although he's two years younger than I am, but I kind of liked that. He was a nice change from the aging northwest anarchists I'd been dating, men who still said things like "Right on," and couldn't seem to get over their radical college student days. How many sit-ins can a woman hear about and keep her sense of humor? In my blinkered mind's eye, Sam was sort of a cross between Paul Newman and my Aunt Annie's podiatrist on a good day. Maybe the Paul Newman thing is a stretch, but Sam does have lovely blue eyes and a nice smile. He's also going gray, but it's hard to tell unless you're up close because his hair is a light, sandy color. I try not

to dwell on the gray in Sam's hair now, because I usually noticed it when we were in bed, and when I think about that, I start wallowing with or without old Blue Eyes.

I met Sam eight months ago at church, but it wasn't like the dating books suggest: "If you want to meet the right kind of person, look in the right kinds of places." In our case, it was a fluke. I am not a practicing member of anything except single parenthood. I was there because Aunt Annie didn't have a ride to dinner at First Presbyterian that night. The friend who was supposed to drive had a problem with her shampoo and set and refused to go out even to drive downtown, as if everyone on the Sunset Highway would notice an old lady with tight curls. I didn't mind. Next to my kids and Arthur, Aunt Annie is my favorite person in the world. She's seventy-three years old, plays killer poker, and she adores me and the girls.

Aunt Annie's poker games are legendary in our family. Any time the family got together at her place, she'd bring out the cards and the chips, and Uncle Dan would pull on his green eye shade. He liked five-card stud, and it made him nuts when anybody, usually Aunt Annie, called for something like Hi Low Split the Pot with deuces wild. She taught all the kids to play, including mine, and we still have a game at her dining room table now and then.

Once we got to the church, Aunt Annie asked the girls and me to stay so she wouldn't have to bother anybody else for a ride home. The next thing I knew, there was Sam sitting at the table and Aunt Annie introduced us because she'd met him there before, and then it turned out *he* needed a ride home, too, since his Buick had developed some kind of problem. All the way home, the girls were giggling in the

back seat with Aunt Annie who kept dropping hints about what a wonderful--and single--person I am. I was pretty sure Sam would not care about how I'd found curtain rods for her kitchen at a really good price, but I was wrong. He did care, and he called me the next day to invite me out for dinner. Sam cared about anything to do with money, especially saving it, which is actually a good thing, of course, but sometimes if you push a really good quality far enough it doubles back on itself and becomes just the opposite of what you started out with in the first place.

Sam is an accountant. At first, I could never remember which one of the big companies he worked for, and that really annoyed him. Arthur says my subconscious was sending me a message, but maybe I was just being passive-aggressive.

"Beth," Sam would say. "How can you keep forgetting the name of the company I work for?" I'd apologize, and he'd give me another business card which I put with the others he'd already given me in the little stack on my dresser.

Arthur and I have been over this a hundred times, but I still feel something of a pang when I think of how I got from that dinner at First Presbyterian to where I am now, on Starshine's massage table while she pounds on my rear. This woman speaks in a high, angelic voice and always calls me Elizabeth, not Beth.

"Elizabeth," she says sweetly, "let me have your left arm. Just relax and let me have it. Don't force it, Elizabeth. Relax." And then she cranks my arm into a position it was never meant to take. I suppose it does beat dribbling my life story out to a therapist fifty minutes at a time for $1.50 a minute. Arthur agrees. He

spent three years and thousands of dollars going to someone named Phil. In the movies, therapists are always Dr. Somebody, but in real life, they want you to call them by their first names. Arthur says Phil probably still believes that deep analysis and willpower would have fixed Arthur's "sexual orientation dilemma," as Phil always put it, but Arthur fixed it himself by moving in with his lover, Harold, and they've been happy as clams ever since.

There were clues the first time Sam and I went out to dinner, of course, that could have told me something if I'd been paying attention, but these things only seem important when you look back. At the time, the noticing part of your brain shuts down, and the cute-as-a-button Debbie Reynolds part takes over smiling and humming and telling you there's a big happy ending coming soon, maybe in the next reel.

Sam and I met at the restaurant after work, and he looked great in a dark blue suit, a shirt so neatly pressed even in the mid-July heat, I couldn't believe he'd been wearing it all day, and a tie that left no question about the quiet, fatherly image. I'd cheated and gone home from work early to change into a soft, flowy dress and ballet flats.

I spent most of my time during dinner working on that trick where you try to eat without looking like you're chewing anything. I didn't manage it very well, so I left a large amount of virtually untouched food on my plate, a situation that was driving Sam crazy, but I didn't know that until much later either. We were at Alfredo's over on Twenty-third Street, one of the trendy new places. I don't recommend an Italian restaurant for a first date, what with the noodles and sauce and

all. Sam had the linguini with clams, and I had the pasta putanesca. He did me the great favor of pointing out that this translated roughly into "spaghetti of the whores." In what was perhaps a clue to the outcome of this whole thing, Sam rolled his linguini neatly on the end of his fork, while I just kind of scooped up my whore's spaghetti and hoped for the best.

Over wine, we had the usual getting-acquainted conversation. Sam told me about his job, and I told him about mine. He told me a little bit about his home town in Michigan, and how he'd come to Portland because of an article he'd read that made him think he could clean up in real estate out here. We found out we had a few things in common: one relatively amicable divorce each, our parents were all dead, and we both hated the fake cheesecake dessert they'd served at the First Presbyterian dinner. We didn't agree on everything, of course; that would have taken the fun out of it. He liked professional hockey, and I went to the baseball games whenever I could. He didn't want kids, but was willing to let me have mine. I'm big dogs, and he's tropical fish. We both had season tickets to the symphony, but his were on Sundays when they have the reduced rate series. We lingered over more wine and then coffee with almond cookies and told each other our favorite authors--Steinbeck and Carver for me, Peter Drucker and Ayn Rand for Sam--and our favorite old movies. He surprised me by saying "King of Hearts," which is one of my favorites, too. All in all, the box score wasn't so bad, and he did have those nice eyes and a good laugh.

After dinner we walked around the neighborhood, looking at all the equally trendy shops that had come in where the family businesses used to be. We watched

the people looking in the windows, and Sam pointed out all the overpriced items he'd never spend good money on. I can't get conversations like that out of my head now; even Starshine's gentle voice and vigorous fingers can't distract me. Sam's words are there like one big dropcloth on the floor of the badly painted room that is my love life. Arthur says it was just a "selection error," and that I need to choose better next time. I think that's a phrase he picked up from Phil, and I remind him how helpful Phil was. Besides, Sam seemed like a good choice at the time. Maybe it was me. Maybe I was too sensitive about the money thing. Or the kids thing.

Even though Sam didn't want kids of his own, he was willing to do things "as a family" with mine. Neither Sam nor the girls were entirely comfortable about it, but he came to have dinner with us on a pretty regular basis. In August, he even invited us to his place for a barbecue, an event that was not a total success, mostly because his "Hot Stuff" apron threw the girls into uncontrollable hysterics. I spent much of the afternoon restraining them with threatening gestures and glares while trying not to laugh myself.

Actually, the girls and I were starting to drive each other nuts about that time, since they'd reached the awkward age between two and twenty. They were ten and twelve, and they much preferred Aunt Annie's company to mine. In fact, they were perfect angels with her. At home, they mostly argued over Nintendo, or argued over who got the last two Oreos, and when they got tired of that, they argued over who was trespassing farther into whose private territory, carefully marked out with yarn and stacks of Legos. I couldn't wait until they blossomed into young ladies and could argue over lipstick and bathroom rights instead. Lizzie, my

intellectual twelve-year-old, was actually starting to shape up a little, but she denied it vigorously, and often told me she had no intention of having periods. She'd been appalled to learn about this from that cute Walt Disney film before we'd had a chance to talk. When I asked her what she planned to do about it, she thought for a bare moment, and then said she planned to read instead. She also did not plan to do "any of that other stuff" she'd learned about either. Good luck to you, Lizzie, my little alien. Send word from your planet when you've turned seventeen and are thinking about birth control pills.

Aunt Annie is a genius with the girls. Every time I picked them up, they'd be loaded with things they'd made: origami birds, woven Easter baskets, fancy cookies, things they would never have considered if I'd suggested them. Aunt Annie liked the arrangement, too--Sam and I could have a nice time alone, and she had company that was both too old and too young for diapers. Aunt Annie was really hoping things would work out for me with Sam. She and Uncle Dan had been happy for forty-three years until he fell out of the cherry tree in their backyard two years ago and whacked his head on the brick barbecue they'd used once since he'd built it. Aunt Annie insists he'd be alive today if he'd put the barbecue on the other side of the yard like she'd suggested.

Starshine says not to dwell on the time with Sam, just learn the lessons from it and move on. When she says things like that I know she wants to talk to me about my karma, too, but I told her at the beginning I wasn't interested in that stuff. These massages with her holistic muscles are as far as I'm willing to take it. A

couple of weeks ago, she started to tell me about one of my past lives before I could remind her of our agreement. She thinks we were buddies in the Roman army. She thinks that's why I called her, not because Arthur gave me her number.

"Of course," she said, stopping her hands for one exquisitely pain-free moment and speaking in her angel voice, "it's possible Arthur was with us." To be honest, these workouts with Starshine are not so bad. They're not as good as a roll in the hay, but at least somebody knows I still have a body, and she doesn't seem to mind the dimples on my thighs.

Arthur has known Starshine for years now. She saw him through the thing with Phil and was delighted when he and Harold got together. Of course, he and Harold have a strong karmic connection. For all we know, Harold was a Roman soldier, too. Starshine also told Arthur about a past life that makes him crazy. In that one, he was married to Gert, the woman who cleans the offices on the floor of the building where he works. Apparently, people just keep showing up in each other's karma from one life to the next, which is a pretty depressing thought considering some of the people I've met in this one.

Gert is a very large, middle-aged woman who wears Doc Martens with her green nylon maintenance crew dress, and her hair is shorter than Arthur's. He says he gets goose bumps every time she walks by and he thinks about being married to her even in a past life. Of course, Starshine says Gert was much younger and very beautiful in that life, a Chinese princess. Arthur says this doesn't make him feel a bit better about seeing Gert in those boots, and he'd much rather hear he'd been married to James Dean.

The day after I broke it off with Sam I felt so sorry for myself, I stayed home from work and wrapped myself up in one of Aunt Annie's afghans on the couch. Aggie played nurse after school and made me one of her famous cracker sandwiches--two slices of white bread with a nice soda cracker filling. At dinner, she figured I was up to mustard and bologna. I tried not to cry when the girls were around, and I succeeded most of the time. Lizzie couldn't understand why I would cry anyway.

"He was a nerd, mom," she told me in her most diplomatic manner. "He never even took you to a movie that wasn't an Early Hour special." She was right about that. "And he didn't like kids that much anyway," she continued, looking very wise behind her big-framed glasses. "You weren't going to *marry* him, were you?" Her look told me there was only one right answer to that question. I don't know what I thought Sam and I were going to do. Maybe I thought he'd wait around until the girls were on their own. Maybe I thought he'd have a change of heart and sweep them up into his arms one day, although with Lizzie's pubescent weight gain, that would have been quite a trick. Maybe in that demented, lying little part of my brain, I thought he'd turn into Bill Cosby only white and become a doctor and generous and we'd all live happily ever after.

The thing is, Sam and I had a lot of fun together. He was reserved, yes, but he was funny, too, and we were comfortable with each other most of the time. And I think we were as honest as two people kind of falling in love but holding back a little ever are. We even had one great week in Mexico when Sam suddenly decided

to cut loose and spend some of his hard-earned money on pure pleasure. Of course, it was the off-season when the rates were cheap, but it was still a big thing for Sam. We swam in the Pacific and drank tequila and made love in our little pink hacienda every night. He serenaded me in very bad Spanish, but it didn't matter because I don't speak the language very well myself and we were both pretty drunk on margaritas. He even tipped all the waiters without arguing about anything. The last night we were there he picked an orchid and stuck it in my hair. It was so romantic, I thought he was going to propose right then, but I guess we were already a little too close to the continental edge for him.

The trip seemed like a breakthrough, but the next week he was back to three dollar movies and clipping coupons. It wasn't his need to save money that bothered me. He'd told me about his father's business failing when he was a kid, and I could see how it affected him. It was just the ungenerous way he went about it, like using the smallest oversight to rationalize stiffing a waiter.

He did try to relax with the girls, and Lizzie is wrong, he didn't hate them, he just didn't know what to do with them. But he tried, like when he helped Aggie design a carton for the egg drop contest at school, and the carton was so sturdy hers was the only egg that survived. Maybe he just hated the idea of wasting a good egg, but he seemed truly pleased when she gave him a photocopy of her certificate of honor with a heart she'd added in red marker.

Of course, the best part of Sam and me, besides the laughing, and the part that's driving me crazy now, was the sex. Starshine may be fully trained in what she does, but Sam seemed to know it all by perfect intuition, and he was remarkably

passionate. I keep asking myself why it wasn't enough, because it was terrific. Sam didn't sleep at my house. He didn't think it would be right even when the girls weren't there. But we were at his place whenever we could get an evening free, and he surprised me by having a king-sized waterbed in which his reserve fell away with his dignified white boxer shorts.

Starshine asked me today what I thought the turning point was. There's always a turning point in a relationship, she says, some moment when it could have gone either way. Usually it's hard to pick one and say, "That was it," but I know the moment with Sam when I felt my heart run into a wall I knew I'd never get over. I didn't know it when it happened, because I kept thinking I'd feel better about it soon, that it wasn't such a big thing, that Sam wasn't Sam, or that he'd be a more generous person with just a little more time.

It was January, two weeks after Christmas. Sam had picked up a coupon for a free dinner at Alfredo's, so we made a date to celebrate our half-year anniversary. The anniversary was actually ten days away, but the coupon would expire by then, so we went.

The girls were at Aunt Annie's for the night, and she was planning to teach them to crochet. I remember thinking that her patience would qualify her as a saint and also hoping they weren't planning to make me something to wear out of Granny squares. Sam and I were working our way through one of Alfredo's six-course extravaganzas that Sam felt we should have since we were getting one free, when it started to snow. People coming into the restaurant were laughing and shaking wet

snow out of their hair. People inside were laughing, too, and pointing out the window. We hadn't had snow in the city for two years. I could see it beginning to stick and pile up a little, glistening in the lights from the restaurant and the shops along Twenty-third. I loved it. I knew it wouldn't last more than a few hours, that it would turn to rain and wash away, but I wanted the magic. I wanted to go out and play in it with Sam, and then go home and make love and believe we might have lots of anniversaries after this one.

"I'll challenge you to a snowball fight after dinner," I told Sam. He looked out the window and frowned.

"I just hope we can get home in this."

"Well," I said, in my cute-as-a-button voice, "if we can't get to your place, I've got a warm bed and cold champagne at my house tonight." Of course, we'd agreed not to sleep at my house, but this was our anniversary or close enough anyway, the girls were happily being spoiled at Aunt Annie's, and there was snow.

For a moment he looked at me oddly, as if I'd told him I had a giraffe in my closet, but then he smiled and asked if I was making him a proposition. He poked his fork toward my plate, and I realized I was eating pasta putanesca again. By the time we finished the wine and settled the check, which was complicated because Sam insisted that the salad he'd substituted for soup should be included in the free part of the dinner, the snow was coming down harder and had piled up a couple of inches on everything. Sam started for the car, but I pulled his hand and asked him to walk just a little first. People were out on the sidewalk throwing snowballs and laughing,

clearly feeling as excited and dippy as I was by it. Sam grumbled about his good shoes, but he stayed beside me and squeezed back when I squeezed his hand.

When we got to the corner, the light was red. We waited, watching cars beginning to slide a little in the slush. And then I noticed the woman a couple of steps from me standing at one of the old green mail collection boxes. I'd seen her before in the neighborhood, a woman who seemed old but could have been any age, my age, I couldn't tell. She had on a gray wool coat with sleeves all frayed at the cuffs and there was snow in her hair. She was wearing a pair of red mittens, but she'd pulled one of them off and was holding it in her other hand. She stood there smiling, speaking quietly to herself as she wrote big block letters with her bare index finger in the snow on top of the letter box, naming each one as she did: D-E-A-R. Then she stopped, her finger still on the tail of the R, and looked off into space as if she might be remembering someone who would want to hear from her. She smiled again and then carefully traced a heart around the letters. I felt a quick, hot tear on the brim of my eyelid and pulled at Sam's arm, making a small gesture toward her. He turned to look just as the light changed, and we started across the slushy street.

"Did you see her face?" I asked him. "Did you see her writing that love letter in the snow?" Sam looked back at the woman again and then at me with an expression that made me think he might cry himself. And then he said it, the thing that was the turning point, and Lizzie is right, I should forget him and get on with my life. He looked at me and said, "You know, I just realized that son of a bitch at Alfredo's overcharged us for your pasta."

We drove to my house, and Sam did come in and spend the night. I made a fire in the fireplace, and we drank wine and listened to old Blue Eyes for a while. Sam kissed me and wished me happy anniversary and gave me a funny card. I tried to tell myself the thing with the woman was no big deal, but it wasn't working. We made love on a blanket in front of the fire, but I couldn't get into it, and I kept seeing Sam's shoes with his socks folded neatly into them under the chair beside my head. As I expected, the snow was gone by morning, and the streets were wet with drizzle again. Sam said he'd have to shower again when he got home, because I didn't have the kind of shampoo he liked for his fine hair. When I picked up the girls at Aunt Annie's, they presented me with a pair of pot holders beautifully crocheted in colors that exactly matched our kitchen.

Sam called me later that day to say he'd enjoyed being at my house for a change, although my mattress had made his back a little stiff. Even so, he hoped it wouldn't be the last time. He chuckled when he said it. I'd never heard him chuckle like that, and it came out like a little donkey snort instead of a laugh. As it turned out, though, that was the last time at my place or his. I called him the next day to reschedule our racquetball date from Thursday to the following Tuesday, and then on Tuesday I canceled. It just kept going like that for a couple of weeks until finally Sam said he didn't know what had happened, but I didn't seem interested in seeing him anymore. When I tried to tell him about the woman, he said he had no idea who I was talking about, and when I described her, he just said, "That drunk?" so I didn't see any point in trying to explain. Maybe she *was* drunk, I don't know, or disturbed. It wasn't really about her, anyway. I told him maybe in a couple of

months, but that was a lie. I won't change my mind. I don't want to grow old with someone who can only be generous in a foreign country.

Arthur and Starshine and Lizzie and Aggie and even Aunt Annie, who never says a bad word about anybody, all tell me it's for the best, each in his or her own way. Starshine told Arthur she thinks Sam might have been one of those in-bred minor European kings in a past life, and Arthur says he himself will always love me and that most men are just insensitive bastards anyway, although we both know he doesn't mean that. Lizzie found a snapshot of Sam in his Hot Stuff apron and drew a big circle with a slash through it over the words. She put it on the refrigerator to remind me of her opinion, and Aggie whipped up a pan of Brownie S'mores to make us all feel better. Aunt Annie finally confessed that she thinks Sam came to the Presbyterian church dinners all the time because they were cheap.

"Beth, sweetheart," she said over a winning hand of Jacks or Better, "I'm so sorry. He seemed like a good catch. I thought a wonderful girl like you could bring him around." Sometimes I think Aunt Annie and Lizzie are on the same planet.

Blues

The last time Dawn goes to see Cody Powell, Wyman knows he's losing her.

Powell comes over to the Tri-Cities from Spokane every few weeks to sing the blues at the Atomic Lounge on the nights Skinny Linda doesn't dance. Dawn is crazy about Cody even though they've never said a word to each other as far as Wyman knows. Sometimes he wonders.

Dawn is a fiery woman, her red hair and all, but Wyman knew that from the start and besides, he's cordial enough for two, everybody tells him. In fact, Dawn says he's too good-natured to be a cop. She says this when she wants him to get a different job; she's afraid he'll get killed in the line of duty. Wyman tells her cops don't normally get killed keeping the peace out here in the desert, but Dawn says anything can happen. Still, Wyman doesn't rile easy and when he does, he almost always gets over it right away.

Wyman and his first wife, the solid and sincere Teresa, called it quits in a friendly and mutual state of boredom after twenty-three years and two kids. Teresa surprised him by heading off to a commune in Oregon where people wear clothes or not as the spirit moves them. At forty-six, Wyman said he was ready for something different, too, and he'd know it when he saw it. A month later he saw Dawn over at the community college where he was teaching people to shoot guns without shooting themselves. Dawn was there to make sure everybody filled out the paperwork for the class, and she'd signed up for it, too.

"I'm checking this out," she'd told Wyman. "I have to make reports on the night school classes."

Ajay Graves, Wyman's friend and partner, had warned Wyman that Dawn had other things on her mind.

"She's checking you out, all right. You better watch it, buddy. That red-headed woman will give an old guy like you a heart attack."

Wyman is eight years older than Dawn, but eight years isn't such a big deal, no matter what Wyman's mother says when she calls from Des Moines. And Dawn is everything Wyman was looking for, has been, except for one or two little things like how she leaves her clothes around the bedroom, but then, nobody's perfect.

"Just don't turn your back," Ajay had told him. "You've got to be careful with a woman who can handle a gun." Ajay would know about that what with his first wife coming after him once with a 30.06.

Wyman is feeling anything but cordial at the moment. He has to be in uniform at the station in half an hour, and he's running late. He can't find his new deodorant among all the bottles and jars Dawn's got on the counter.

Dawn and Wyman have been married for three years now, the second time around for her, too. They've been happy enough, but little things are starting to tick Wyman off. This stuff in the bathroom, for instance. Teresa never kept stuff like this, and for a guy who likes things neat, it's a pain in the ass, all those soaps in little baskets. Who the hell ever uses them? Nobody, that's who. They just sit there on the counter, getting dusty and taking up space.

Out the window, he can see trees bending in the wind. It looks like a real good dust storm coming up--a Termination wind, that's what the old timers called it, the kind that made people go nuts, especially the women. Fifty years ago, men would come home from work on the Project and find their wives with the suitcases all packed and ready to go, the sand and dust blowing right in through the cracks of their flimsy government houses. Later, of course, everybody realized the wind was more than just a nuisance, that the wind might have been blowing more than dust and grit, but nobody told them at the time. Wyman expects things will be lively for the next couple of days between the wind and a weekend. Friday nights are bad enough without this, all the construction crews hitting the bars with money in their pockets, along with kids from the college ready to blow off classes for a couple of days.

"Dawn, honey," Wyman calls down the hall to the living room. "Honey, could you turn the radio down?" A heavy blues bass reverberates along the walls, and Wyman's getting a headache.

"It's not the radio. It's the CD player," Dawn calls back without turning it down. "It's the blues, baby." Wyman makes a face at himself in the mirror.

"Well, fine," he says under his breath, "I know it's the damn blues, fuck you very much." First the deodorant and now the music, and what's worse, he knows Cody Powell is coming to town this weekend, and Dawn will be wanting him to go.

"I don't care what it is, could you turn it down?" He takes a deep breath to level himself off. "Please, honey?" Dawn's preoccupation with the blues has

become an unexpected bone of contention in their otherwise ordinary life. Get up, go to work, come home, fix things on the weekend, go out for dinner with friends, warm bodies in a warm bed, a little TV and cold beer, chukar partridge or pheasant during hunting season. These were the makings of a good life, these were enough for Wyman and for Dawn, too, he was sure, until this blues thing got hold of her when Cody Powell came to town six months ago.

Sometimes Wyman wonders if his mother was right about marrying a woman eight years younger, but he doesn't think so. He knows Dawn was just the bow on the package of his mother's discontent that started with him trading the corn fields of Iowa for the great Northwest. Nothing he did after that was right, and every conversation since then has started, "If you were just back in Iowa, Wyman." She wouldn't even come for the wedding, claiming she'd done it once and once was all that was required of a mother.

"Hell, Wy," Ajay tells him, "this blues thing is just a phase. Women go through these things. Like when Lorna got that recycling bug up her ass." Wyman doesn't consider Ajay an expert on women, given his four marriages, including the one with the 30.06 business, but he does remember Ajay having to save every little plastic bag from his lunch for months because Lorna, his most recent and youngest wife, was into rescuing the planet. She used those little bags over and over again. She even counted them and expected every single one back in the pail at the end of the day along with Ajay's apple cores and orange peels for the compost pile.

"She got over it. Dawn'll get over the blues."

Wyman doesn't think it's the same kind of thing, plastic bags and the blues, but he doesn't try to explain why to Ajay. Besides, he knows that Lorna gave up the recycling because Ajay got tired of it and filled all the little plastic bags in his lunch pail one day with cigar butts he'd saved up for the occasion. Wyman wonders how long it will be before Lorna hits the road.

Wyman is surprised at how much he's come to hate the blues. The dark jealousy the music arouses in him is so unwelcome that it scares him a little, but what really scares him is how much he enjoys the feeling sometimes, especially when he watches Dawn with her eyes closed, swaying and moving her hips, listening to other men sing about sexual things to a beat that reminds him of the steady grind of bodies in the long, slow, first part of lovemaking. He thinks if he were another kind of man, one who riled more easily, he could kill somebody over it, but he's not sure who it would be.

Once when he tried to talk to Dawn about the way he felt, she'd laughed.

"Women sing the blues, too," she'd told him.

"I know that," he'd said. "You just don't happen to listen to any of them."

"I like what I like," she'd said. "It's nothing personal." But Wyman takes it personally because he's seen her face when she watches Cody Powell, the way he moves around the stage. Wyman can't figure it out. The guy has got to be close to fifty himself, and he's not good looking, not like a movie star or anything. But Dawn can't get enough of him or the music. And when they make love now, she whispers in his ear, "Slow, baby. Like the blues. Slow, slow."

He tries, but he can't seem to keep it slow, not the way she wants it anyway, not like he used to, and once or twice recently, the question hasn't even been fast or slow. Wyman hates to admit that it's been more a question of "if" a couple of times. Afterward, she always says she's satisfied, but the next time she whispers in his ear again, "Slow, baby, like the blues. Like the blues." Wyman isn't sure which he hates more these days--the music or those words in his ear. What he hates most is Cody Powell, but in the cop part of his brain, he can hardly make a case for that, Cody being an innocent party, all things considered.

Wyman courted Dawn for almost a year before he could convince her that he wouldn't run off with another woman like her first husband did. He took her to the coast and up to Seattle a couple of times, and even back to Iowa to meet his mother and show Dawn the corn fields. They'd gone in the late spring before everything got hot and dusty, and she'd been surprised that he'd left those big wide fields for the desert. She liked the way the fields went on for miles and miles, not wild like the desert, but all squared off and laid out straight as an arrow. That was exactly the part Wyman didn't like, everything in tight boxes, everything exactly right and no place to put your foot outside the line. He was a cop, sure, and he likes things neat around the house, but not all the time, and not outdoors. He wants to know there's room to wander around a little, too, cross over a line into a wild place when you need it.

"I saw wild places out in Iowa," Dawn tells him.

"Yeah," he says. "But not as many and not as wild."

When they came back from that trip, he told her he wanted her to think about taking a chance on another man, older but young at heart. He told her she was just what he was looking for and how much he loved her red hair and the way she fit when they were dancing, and how much he liked her laugh and admired the way she'd pulled herself together after her husband left and everything he could think of to let her know how much he loved her. He'd said all this early one morning while they were lying curled up in Dawn's big waterbed. He'd watched her when he said it, but she'd just kept looking up at the rough white plaster ceiling with the little mica stars in it.

"You're only eight years older," she'd said. "You're not a grandpa."

"No, but I could be any day now. Would that bother you?"

"I don't know. I've still got a lot of dance time in me."

"I'm not in a damn walker yet. What do you say, Dawn? I'd do everything I could to make you happy."

"I'm thinking it over," she'd said. Then she'd put her head on Wyman's shoulder and he could feel his shoulder get wet, and he knew she must be crying because she was scared the same thing would happen all over again and she'd be left by herself.

"I'm not going to do that," he'd said quietly.

And in a minute, she'd started to smile, he could feel it, and she'd put her wet face up and looked him right in the eye. "You better not," she'd said. "If you do, I'll shoot you."

"Good enough," he'd laughed, and the deal was done.

Dawn, honey," Wyman calls again. "Can you give me a hand here?"

She doesn't answer. The music rolls out, and the song ends, the voice spiking up to a high note of anguish just as he knocks over a basket of soaps shaped like little pink pigs. In the silence, he continues looking for his deodorant, leaving the pigs where they are.

"What?" Dawn is suddenly standing in the doorway. Wyman jumps at her voice.

"Jesus, honey. You scared me, sneaking up like that."

"I didn't sneak up. You called me, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but you didn't answer, so I quit. How come you didn't answer?"

"I was listening to the music."

"And dancing," he says.

"And dancing. What have you got against dancing, Mr. Grumpy? You used to like to dance. It's not against the law or something, is it?"

"No," he says, trying to keep things light, "it's not against the law as long as you got your clothes on in public."

"Well, what if I don't? What then, officer? Skinny Linda takes hers off in public just about every night." Wyman knows there are a lot of people who'd just as soon Skinny Linda didn't do that. As Ajay has noted, the woman has no tits and no rhythm, and she'd be better off working in a bakery or something.

Dawn starts to pull her t-shirt off over her head doing a couple of bumps, better than the ones Skinny Linda can do, Wyman thinks.

"You going to arrest me or what?"

Wyman laughs and admires Dawn's bare mid-section. No way, baby, not as long as you're right here in the comfort of our own home. Go for it."

He reaches out to tickle her, but she pulls the shirt back down and slaps at his hand.

"Guess who's playing at the Atomic tomorrow night," she asks as she gathers up the little pig soaps and puts them back in the basket.

"Now how'd you get over there?" Wyman spots his deodorant behind a square box of tissues.

"Wyman, did you hear me?"

"What?" He rolls the cold, smooth ball over his underarms and then touches Dawn's nose with it.

"Wyman, don't! I hate the smell of that stuff. Did you hear me about the Atomic?"

"I heard you."

"Guess who?" She rubs his shoulder.

"Cody Powell, and we're not going." He surprises himself with this declaration, then looks at his face in the mirror and admires the firm line of his jaw.

"Why not?" she asks, and Wyman can see by the look in her green eyes that she's not going to give up easily.

"Dawn, honey, you know I hate that music," he says, smoothing down his blond hair with his hands, wanting to be nonchalant but not sure it's working. At least he hasn't started to go bald. He'll have a full head of hair until he dies, just

like his old man. "They turn those speakers up way too loud, hurts my eardrums. I don't know how anything that pitiful can be so loud."

She looks at herself in the mirror beside him. She pulls her long hair back and turns her head from side to side, catching different angles in the light. "I think I'm going to cut my hair," she says.

"Honey, don't do that." The announcement gives Wyman a feeling in his chest that surprises him. Wyman loves her long hair. He hopes she'll never cut it.

"Everybody's got short hair now."

"So? You're not everybody."

She makes a face at him. "You sound like my mother when I used to ask for something."

"I like you the way you are," Wyman says. Right this minute, he feels a heavy load of superstition about Dawn, about the two of them standing here in front of the mirror. He wants to keep everything exactly the way it is now, even the arguing. The feeling in his chest turns into a hard knot that tells him something bad could happen if anything changes, at least until after Cody Powell leaves town again.

"Well, I'm going," Dawn says making a little "fuck you" face at him, thrusting her head up a tiny bit and toward him. "I'm going to see Cody Powell tomorrow night. You can come or not."

"Hey," he says quietly. The blues are one thing, but this is new. Dawn and Wyman don't go places without each other, not places like the Atomic. Wyman feels scared and reaches out for her, tries to get his arms around her, but she

squirms against them. He tries to hold her, and she pushes against his arms, finally pounding him with her fists, hard enough to hurt him a little. The pounding surprises him and, by the look on her face, it surprises her, too. He lets her go, but she stands right there, breathing fast. He thinks for a minute she might take a swing at him.

"Dawn, honey," he says, "what's going on here? You okay?"

"Fine," she says and turns away from him, walking down the hallway. Half a minute later, he hears the music start again, softer now, but still the back beat of the blues.

When Wyman comes in at two in the morning, he's bushed from wrestling an unusual number of drunks in and out of the squad car. He's also tired from busting up half a dozen domestic fights which everybody blamed on the wind, as he might have expected, couples taking out every hurt and meanness on each other, people already on the edge falling over with nothing but empty space between them and hard news. The old timers were not far wrong when they named that wind. It sucks the energy right out of you, and makes you feel like you'd just as soon throw in the towel. But Wyman knows how to handle these things what with all he saw growing up, his father hurt and mean with nothing but his fists to speak against it. Once with Teresa, when he'd thought there was another man, he'd come close, and the thought that he might start living by his father's rules instead of his own scared him bad, so he'd made a point of learning to stay friendly. He doesn't want this thing with Dawn and Cody Powell to change that.

Wyman is especially worn out from talking things over for two hours with the teen-age son of one of the cleanup honchos. The kid is pissed at his dad and wants to organize a protest demonstration. The kid thinks he can get his hands on some hazardous waste material, just a little he says, and drop it outside his dad's office in the Federal Building to scare the shit out of everybody including his old man. For the better part of two hours, Wyman tried to get him to see the obvious problem with his idea, assuming he knew where to get the stuff in the first place. Wyman is sorry the old days are gone when a kid who was mad at his father just kept the family car out an extra hour or two on Saturday night. He'd done that a few times himself.

Tired as he is, Wyman takes a minute to straighten things up in the living room. He doesn't think of himself as fussy, he just likes things straightened up a little. It's probably just as well his mother lives in Iowa and refuses to visit. From the coffee table, he picks up a tea cup with a dried bag of Lipton's in the saucer. Next to it are a bottle of nail polish remover and two bottles of polish, one the pink Dawn always uses on her toenails, Seashell, and next to it a bright shade of red he's never seen on her. Body Heat, it says on the label. Two little cotton balls are sitting in the cup, one stained with the Seashell color polish and the other just damp with remover. He turns off the light Dawn's left on for him and takes the bottles into the bathroom. He puts them away in one of the drawers, then carries the cup and saucer into the kitchen. He wants something to eat before he goes to bed, but before he gets the refrigerator open, he finds a book on the counter. A corner is turned down on one page. Wyman smooths it and slips in a piece of paper from the

phone pad to mark her place instead. He looks at the spine and runs his finger over the title: *New Careers in the Travel Industry*. He doesn't remember Dawn saying anything about wanting a career in the travel industry.

Wyman leaves the light off in the bedroom while he undresses so he won't wake her, but in the darkness he stubs his toe on another book she's left beside the bed and wakes her anyway.

"Shit." he whispers in the dark. "Fuck."

"Wyman?" Dawn is immediately awake but her voice is soft and drowsy.

"Jesus, honey, you left me a booby trap, you know that."

"What? What booby trap?"

"Your book. Maybe you could keep it on your side of the bed." Maybe she could tell him what she had in mind with the travel thing.

"Sorry," she says and reaches for his shoulder. He's sitting on the edge of the bed in his briefs, rubbing his wounded toe. "I'll bet I can make it feel better." She drags her fingernails gently down his bare back and up again. "Good medicine." She repeats the movement.

"It's my toe that hurts, Dawn," Wyman says, irritated at the pain in his foot and something else he can't name.

"Sorry," she says. She drops her hand and turns away from him, pushing her pillow into a lump under her head.

"I'm just tired. It's been a long day, and my toe hurts, and the damned wind's blowing like a son of a bitch, and I just want to get some sleep, honey." As he settles himself in the bed, she curls herself against his belly.

"Good night, officer," she says. "Wake me up when you're feeling friendlier." And about six a.m. he wakes her.

Saturday morning, Dawn mentions Cody Powell and the Atomic again. Wyman looks forward to Saturdays, but today he can feel his mood break all to pieces.

Wyman is trying to fix the cover on the lawn mower, and he's sorting through a big jar of screws looking for one the right size. He doesn't want to say no again. He doesn't want to lose this fight.

"I don't know, honey," he tells her. "Something might come up."

By four in the afternoon, the thing he'd hoped for comes up, a call from the state patrol saying a caravan of anti-nuke protestors are on their way up the Gorge from Portland and are threatening to chain themselves to the fence out at the 300 Area. Wyman gets the call to go see if he can talk them out of it.

"I don't think I'll be too late," he tells Dawn. "We can go out for dinner when I get home."

"How about Cody Powell?" she says.

"Honey, that place will be packed." Wyman is right. There aren't many places to go dancing on a Saturday night, and besides, everybody but Wyman seems to like Cody Powell well enough.

"You could meet me there."

"Dawn, please."

"Wyman," Dawn says, stepping back and looking at him seriously, "I'm going to hear Cody Powell. If you want to come, you come. I want you to. But it doesn't matter whether you do or not. I'm going."

They don't speak to each other again while Wyman gets ready to go. He's agitated and clumsy. He cuts his chin shaving and when he reaches for his deodorant, he tips over a jar of dusty little soaps that look like ladies' fans. He scoops the whole mess, jar and soaps into the wastebasket without a word, and then he drops the basket of pink pigs in for good measure. At five, he heads out the door in his uniform.

"I'll call you later," he says.

"If I'm gone, I'll leave you a message," Dawn answers, not looking up from her book.

"Don't be gone," he says. "I'll call you. Please." But he knows she'll be gone.

All hell breaks loose when the demonstrators try to rush the guard shack out at the Area. Then some of them head downtown to the contractors' offices, and another bunch drive over to make a run on the nuclear power plant.

"You ever seen anything like this?" Ajay asks Wyman. "Who the hell organized this barbecue anyway?"

Wyman doesn't recognize anybody in the group. It's not the usual crowd who show up. Even though people come here every few months to protest what goes on at the Project, Wyman hasn't made up his own mind about it--the Project,

the power plant, the protestors who want to shut it all down. He's not sure either about the cleanup work out in the desert, all that stuff they buried without knowing what they were doing. He's got buddies who work at the plant, good men who wouldn't want any harm to themselves or their families. They tell him it's safe. They explain to him how it all works--the rods, the water, the miles of stainless steel pipes, all the systems to keep an accident from happening. They tell him the big cloud of steam coming out of the cooling tower is harmless. Still, there's the news that comes down almost every day about the mistakes those people made forty years ago, all the things they did that turn out to be a big problem now. Even though he's happy to be here in the desert, he's secretly glad he grew up in Iowa, away from the wind. He also knows that some of his buddies over at the plant carry lucky charms around with them. Just in case.

Things don't calm down until well after nine. By then the photographers have taken pictures of people chained to the fence. Reporters from the Tri-City Herald have come and gone, and Wyman talks to a gray-haired couple who seem to be in charge. They convince everybody to go home except two women who insist on being arrested. Wyman thinks they're probably hoping to get a book out the deal, but he's too tired to give a damn.

It's almost ten when he checks into his office. He sits at the desk playing with the cord to his phone until he finally punches the buttons, listens to the familiar pattern of the tones. The phone rings three times while he waits. Then he hears the

click of the answering machine, and his stomach stiffens when Dawn's metallic voice kicks in.

"Hello," it says, "this is Dawn. We can't come to the phone right now. Please leave your message at the beep, and we'll call you back." He's about to hang up when he hears a giggle, and the message continues. "Wyman, if this is you, honey, come on out to the Atomic. I'm going early to get us a table by the band. I love you." Another five seconds go by, and then Wyman hears the beep, but all he can say into the phone is "Fuck."

The Atomic Lounge is out at the "Y" where the roads between the three cities come together, and the rivers, too. The road closest to the Atomic goes past a park that isn't much of a park, just a strip of grass and some trees beside the water. In the summer, the grass turns brown in the desert heat. The road leads into the parking lot which is packed by the time Wyman gets there, changed from his uniform to jeans, cowboy boots, and a cotton sweater.

The minute he steps out of the car, Wyman hears the music, so he knows it's loud inside. The wind is blowing hard again as he walks to the door, grit and papers flying around between the cars.

Wyman stands for a moment under the flashing blue and red sign on the roof over the solid wooden door, the neon bomb exploding every ten seconds, and then he pulls hard on the brass handle. Inside, it's nearly dark except for the stage and dance floor and the lights hanging over the pool tables on the far side of the room. The haze of cigarette smoke burns his nose. Bodies are moving on the lighted dance

floor, but he sees that Dawn's is not one of them. He closes his eyes tight to get used to the darkness of the room. When he opens them after a couple of seconds, he sees Dawn by herself at a table near the front, two glasses on the table, one empty. Slow service or somebody else's glass. Even off-duty, Wyman can't stop taking things in, noticing details, being a cop. He sees Cody Powell, too, at the center of the stage. Sometimes, on what Wyman thinks is a good night, Powell stays behind his drums, singing over his own loud beat. Wyman hoped for that tonight, for Cody isolated and locked down, no movement except for the drumming and the tossing of his head. But Cody is out front with the microphone. The stage is lit with blue and red spots focused on him.

Wyman watches for a minute, his ears already hurting from the sound over the industrial size speakers on either side of the room. Why the hell does this make him feel so old? He used to go to rock concerts, used to stay up listening to the Dead and Janis, to Jimi. Hell, he hasn't always been a cop. And he hasn't always been fifty years old.

Instead of joining Dawn at the table, he sits at the bar ten feet behind her watching as she sways to the music. She lifts one shoulder slowly and then the other, back and forth, a snake to the charm. Wyman feels the vibration of the bass up through the seat of the barstool. He's not stupid. He knows how it must feel to Dawn. She's concentrating on Powell, and Wyman thinks Powell may be looking back at her, but it's hard to tell in the light. Wyman can't stop noticing things, taking in the details like he might later be asked to describe the scene of a crime. Powell moves around the stage like he does, tall, rangy, the sharp lines of his

face even sharper with the overhead spots playing off them. He's got on his loose jeans and a dark sweater, but he holds his hands at his hips in a manner Wyman would have to describe in a police report as provocative. Powell moves the way Dawn moves--swaying, shoulders up, down. He cues the band from the front of the stage, not looking back at them, but waving his hand this direction or that, bringing in first the lead guitar, then the bass, the drums, the second guitar, calling the beat, marking out time, signaling the next solo, all the while rocking rhythmically to the sound. Once or twice, he dances a few steps, a slow saunter more than a dance, tossing his head, the hair falling back over his lean face.

The words come now while Wyman listens, but this time it looks like Powell's singing straight to Dawn, and Wyman can hear her voice whispering in his ear, "Slow. Slow, baby, slow." This is what she means. Cody Powell is looking at her, Wyman is not imagining it, he's sure he's not imagining it. Cody smiles at her, watching her move. Dawn has her hands behind her head, her fingers laced into her red hair, the hair pushed up in the back. She half turns, and Wyman sees the smile on her face. He recognizes the look and feels a rush of heat from his belly up to his throat.

"*Saw you, pretty baby,*" Cody is singing, "*I saw you sittin' by yourself. Saw you, pretty baby. I saw you sittin' by yourself. Tell me why your man would go and leave this pretty baby on the shelf.*" Dawn sways. Cody sways back. The waitress leans across the bar and shouts in Wyman's ear, asking him over the music what he wants. Wyman knows her, but he can't remember her name at the moment.

"Beer," he says, not turning.

"Draft?"

"Fine," he says.

"Looks like Cody's edging in there, Wyman," the waitress laughs. "That guy's sure got the moves. The only reason any woman I know would throw him out of bed would be to screw him on the floor." Wyman feels his jaw tense. "You better get over there and let him know Dawn's taken."

The bridge is over, the guitar solo, and Wyman hears the next line.

"*Wearin' that pretty sweater*," Powell sings, "*you look so sexy over there.*" Dawn is wearing a yellow sweater. The son of a bitch is making this song up on the spot and singing it to Dawn. Wyman can't see her face, but he can imagine the smile, eyes closed. He can hear the cordial voice in his head telling him to calm down, but it's not working.

"*Wearin' that pretty sweater, you look so sexy over there.*" Wyman lets the feeling pour over him. He wants to grab Dawn by her hot red hair and drag her out of the Atomic. Or kill Cody Powell. Or both. He can't make up his mind.

"*You make me wanta wish, that I could be your rocking chair.*" As he sings, Powell pulls both clenched fists toward his hips and thrusts his pelvis forward. The universal gesture. Wyman watches as the drummer laughs. Cody looks back at the drummer and then at Dawn. She picks up her glass of wine and sips it, looking at Cody over the rim. He looks back and smiles.

"That's it," Wyman says, and slams his glass down hard on the counter. Foam splashes out and onto his hand. "That son of a bitch."

"Hey," the waitress says. LeeAnne, that's her name, he remembers now. Sixty years old and thin as a rail, but pretty in an exotic kind of way. Wyman knows she danced here years before Skinny Linda was even born. "Careful what you say about Mr. Cody Powell, Wyman. He's got a lot of fans here, and we want to keep it that way. Besides, he's harmless. Your wife's not going anywhere. He's got a real cute wife of his own and three kids over in Spokane. It's just a show to get the juices jangling. If I was twenty years younger, honey, and not behind this bar, I'd be out there trying to get my share of his attention. Nothing a woman likes better than a man playing music for her. But believe me, Wyman, when the show's over, Cody goes home to Stacy and those boys."

Wyman wishes it was that simple. He feels a rush of relief, but at the same time he wonders what it means to a woman to have a man playing music for her. He doesn't want to ask LeeAnne. He wants to ask Dawn, but he has no idea how he'd put the question together.

Cody goes on to another verse, something different, along the same line, but different. Wyman doesn't think the rest of it is about Dawn. He's sure it's not, and Powell is looking somewhere else in the room now. Maybe the first lines weren't about her either, but it doesn't matter. Wyman knows the problem isn't Cody Powell. It's the protestors and that goddamn power plant throwing something up in the air every day, maybe steam or maybe something worse. It's being fifty years old in a place where the sand blows whenever the hell it damn pleases and where your red-headed wife thinks about new jobs and music you hate and dreams of making love with a guy who sings the blues and can probably make love as slow as

she wants. It's about Ajay being wrong, that it's not a phase, that Dawn is headed someplace Wyman knows nothing about, and it wouldn't matter even if he sat down with her right this minute and held her hand and touched her red hair and ran his finger down her back the way she likes. It's about people you know becoming people you never even dreamed of meeting.

Wyman slides off the barstool and walks toward the door. He sees Dawn turn toward him as he goes, but he doesn't stop. He wants some air, and he's hungry. He realizes he hasn't eaten since noon, and the food at the Atomic sucks. Maybe he'll go on over to the Country Kitchen and get a steak. Some of the guys might be there, and they can shoot the breeze about the protest tonight. Maybe Ajay will be there. Maybe he'll want to talk to Ajay about this. He's not sure yet. Dawn's fine. Nobody will bother her, and Wyman doesn't have any idea what he'd say to her even if he did go sit down at her table. Whatever it might be, he's pretty sure she wouldn't hear it. Dawn will come home after a while. She'll probably be ready for an argument, but he'll be friendly. She'll say she thought she saw him there tonight, and she'll ask him why he didn't stay. He'll tell her he was tired, that he didn't want to spoil her fun. He'll tell her about all the stuff that happened out at the project, about the two women in jail tonight and how they'll probably make a million bucks off their book, and she'll laugh about the funny parts. He'll ask her about Cody Powell, and she'll say he was great as usual, too bad Wyman didn't stay. Wyman will be cordial, he'll agree with her. That's what will happen. And then they'll go to bed. Maybe she'll want to make love. And she'll whisper in Wyman's ear, "Slow, slow, slow."

Wyman sees this movie roll out in front of him, and he knows it's not a steak he wants, and whatever it is, he's not going to find it at the Country Kitchen or back at the house with the soaps and the blues and new careers he knows nothing about. He slams the car door shut and digs out of the gravel like a kid in a hotrod.

He finds a country station, turns it up loud, and heads up the highway past a bunch of new houses to the road that leads over the Horse Heaven hills, going south. The wind is still blowing hard, and he knows there'll be hell to pay trying to drive through the dust up there. But the stars are out, and once he's over the Horse Heavens and drops down to cross the Columbia, he could pick up I-84 and go someplace. He could drive to Portland or Boise. Hell, he could go all the way to the ocean, either ocean if it comes to that, right through Utah and Wyoming and Nebraska, right past the corn fields of Iowa, until he finds himself standing on a dock watching the sun come up over an ocean he's never even seen. Drive long enough, and a guy can go anywhere he wants. He can call Ajay and Dawn from wherever he lands by morning.

Wyman rolls down the window and rests his left arm on the frame, slapping the top of the car in time to the music. Even with the dust, the air smells sweet in the warm night with alfalfa and hay fields not far away. The headlights cut a clean, narrow path through the darkness, but he knows how wild the land is just beyond the light, the cultivated fields plowed right out of the desert and, farther back in the darkness, no fields at all. Wyman doesn't care anymore about the wind or the dust or the steam coming out of that reactor. Wyman thinks about his promise to Dawn, the one he'd made in her bed, looking up at the mica stars, but who the hell was

leaving who here, anyway, if that's what he was doing? Dawn might as well have packed up and moved out herself, the way she wasn't Dawn anymore. He shifts his eyes to the rearview mirror and watches a car coming up hard to pass him. After the car goes by, he looks into the darkness. Behind him, beyond the lights at the bottom of the bluff and beyond the new houses, back where the rivers are coming together, he can barely make out the blue and red bomb, tiny now, exploding again and again and again.

Geography

"Bran muffins," my Irish daughter, Megan, tells me from three thousand miles away.

"What does this have to do with Greg?" I ask, holding the phone against my shoulder. We were talking about men, about Greg, the last of my long-term lovers. Out the window, I catch a glimpse of the blue Atlantic, cool and steady as it laps the shore of the next cove. I'm half an hour home from a trip to Boston. All I want to do is shed my clothes, but Megan wants to talk. I continue holding the phone with my shoulder as I glance at the stack of mail that's accumulated in the last five days. I reach beyond the stack for my glass of Chivas and ice and then peel off my panty hose. In July, things get sticky on the coast of Maine.

"Forget Greg," Megan says, "he's history." Her certainty causes an unexpected twinge in my mid-section. "Somebody new. Somebody better." I'm not sure there is anybody better, but I sip my Chivas and listen. I'm not sure, either, that my daughter has the answers for me. I need to hear from somebody else, somebody older, more experienced in loss. I need a stern lecture about not getting hung up on anybody. About how I'm a good person and lovable, and that I don't need Greg to make it true. About how it doesn't mean a thing that he's been in Florida for the past six months and only calls once every other week. Lily, my other daughter, the half-Persian beauty in the family, offers different advice from southern California. She tells me what I need is two weeks on a dude ranch in

Montana. I want to tell her that's a poor substitute for a noisy, juicy, heart-pounding romp with Greg, but I won't. I'm her mother.

"We made bran muffins and sold our house. I'm not kidding, Mom. Two months on the market and no buyers, then we sold it to the next people in the door, just like that. Bran muffins and bingo, it was gone." I'm amused by Megan's testimonial, but I question the connection. Correlation is not causation. One of the few things I remember from Psychology 101. Just because two things happen sequentially doesn't mean the first caused the second, as in my turning fifty-one this year doesn't necessarily have anything to do with Greg being in Florida.

"It's a great story," she goes on. "Trust me. Make the muffins. Something good will happen."

I love my daughters and they, in their own ways, love me, too. And now that they are growing older, they give me advice. Too often, I recognize it from their youth, my own words spoken back to me, cautionary and protective, strident sometimes--although I don't remember being strident--particularly words related to my slowly reviving sex life. Reviving is too strong a word. The Ice Age happened faster than this. I'm dating a little since Greg left.

"It's different now, Mom," Lily always reminds me when she calls. "You have to be careful."

I don't want to hear this from a thirty-two-year-old. I know about careful. I'm intelligent, educated, I read, I manage a business. I know what's happening in the world, including the world of sex. And I was young once. I understand the

implications of "careful" better than my daughters would believe, or maybe they know more about me than they say.

I'm also just a little embarrassed by the neon-colored condoms Lily sent for my birthday. "Just in case," she giggled at me over the phone. Just in case what, I wondered. Is sex better in day-glo orange?

They want to know about my dates like I wanted to know about theirs--they pry and offer opinions. Thank God they are too far away to meet and judge the way I never did but might have if I were another kind of mother.

"Clifford told me about the muffins," Meggy says. Clifford is a friend of hers I haven't met. He's probably fine, but the muffin thing sounds odd. Megan is attracted to odd people, always has been, since she was a child.

When she was twelve years old, she started going downtown by herself on Saturdays to take pictures with the camera Jack taught her to use, the second Jack in my life, but that's another story. Twelve years old, she rode the bus by herself to take pictures. A child could do that, then, in Seattle. At first, she took pictures of buildings or pigeons or a baby sometimes in the park, artsy closeups of parking meters and sewer grates and trash. Good pictures. Jack was a natural teacher. Then she started crossing over Jackson Street and shooting pictures that scared me when she pulled them out of the developer. Faces of old men and women, hookers, street kids hanging up all over the darkroom Jack fixed for her in our basement, all of them smiling or waving at her out of their meanness and poverty, beyond their desperate lives. They smiled into Megan's camera, and then their smiles were

pinned up in that little room next to the washer and dryer and the old green ping pong table with the sagging net.

"Megan," I'd tell her, "you can't go there again. You can't go to Skid Row any more."

"But Mom," she'd say with a little whine in her voice, or maybe it was exasperation, I think now, "they like me."

"They're dangerous," I'd tell her. "You never know what people like that will do. Just look at them."

"I'm not afraid. They're not dangerous. They like me."

One day she came home with a big seashell picked up some place far from Seattle, I could tell. I was pulling clothes out of the dryer when she ran down the stairs.

"Dolores gave it to me," she said, excited, holding it out, handing it to me for my inspection and approval.

"Dolores," I said.

"This one," she said, pointing to a picture of a woman with smooth gray hair and intelligent eyes and a better smile than I would have expected from a woman living on the street. "She knows all about seashells. She went to Australia once."

"Uh huh," I told her. "More likely she found it in the trash."

"I'm keeping it," she said fiercely before I could tell her to throw it away.

"Wash it good, then. There's Clorox under the sink," I said, handing it back to her.

"Mom," she said with that little whine. "It's not contaminated. She's nice. She reminds me of you." The crushing compliment.

"She's homeless," I told her. "You don't know where she got this or where it's been."

"Dolores says you're not homeless as long as you've got yourself." I watched as she turned the shell slowly in her hand. It was beautiful, with brown and gold lines radiating out from the center over a washed surface, a color that was almost blue. Some creature had lived in it before it had been tossed up on the beach. Now the shell belonged to my daughter. In that moment, despite my words, I didn't care where Dolores had gotten it or where it had been since it left that beach. I felt strange, a little jealous; I recognized the feeling, but I couldn't tell then or now if I was jealous that Megan owned such a beautiful thing or that she had a friend I didn't even know who would give it to her, part with it willingly and, I suspected from the look on her face, with something like love.

"Who's Clifford?" I ask because I know she expects it. I swirl the Chivas and ice gently and hold the wet glass to my throat. Humidity hangs everywhere around the room. I'm waiting to hear the story, but I'm also wanting to get into my shorts.

"You know," she says, trusting that I remember every detail of her life as any good mother would. "He worked at the paper supply house. You remember--the job from Hell."

I remember. Every time Megan called me that year, no matter where I happened to be at the time--California, Colorado, even West Virginia for a while on a project with the coal miners--I'd hear about the paper supply house. Then one night while I sat on the bed in an overly-decorated room at the Marriott in Albuquerque, the air conditioner whirring softly under the window, she'd shouted into my ear across two thousand miles. "We quit! Clifford and I just told that jerk we weren't taking it any more and walked out. And guess what?" I could guess. Meg is the charmed one in the family with the luck of her Irish father. She already had a new job. I could point out to her that it hadn't taken muffins, then, to do the trick, but I won't.

"I wish you were here to celebrate with me," she'd gone on.

"Me, too," I'd said, being only half honest. I would have celebrated with her if I'd been home, but at the moment I was happy at the Marriott.

"Do something wonderful tonight anyway," she'd laughed.

I'd reached for my Chivas, the tiny ice cubes from the machine melting in the sterilized hotel glass, and looked across the room at Greg, who had flown in for the weekend to surprise me. "I'm happy for you, honey," I'd told her as Greg moved to the bed and began massaging my neck. "I will do something wonderful tonight. I promise." I'd hung up just as he slipped the straps of my bra off my shoulders.

Truth. I'd been happy to see him, but I was also tired after a hard day working out details for a computer changeover at the power plant outside of town. I'd planned to get by with the Chivas and a room service dinner, but when you are

forty-nine and a lover flies in to surprise you, you don't test the limits of "lost opportunities." Besides, except for my thighs which I'd hated since ninth grade when Linda Martin pointed out in the locker room at James Garfield High School that good thighs did not come together at the top, I felt wonderful with Greg. For one thing, I'd started believing that I'd reached the age where men were only interested in me for my mind. How could I have ever wanted anybody to love me for my mind? Twenty years ago maybe, I could get away with that. I even think I might have believed it then, but when you still have a firm figure and no perceptible pulls of gravity, you can believe a lot of things. "I want you to love me for my mind." What a crock. I wanted Greg to love me for the way my legs wrapped around him, for the way I opened to his touch, for the smells and flavors of my skin. Forget my mind, I would think to him, forget that I can quote pages of poetry and name all the major constellations in the northern sky. Forget that I do the Sunday Times crossword puzzle in ink and write change-over strategies for entire corporations. Forget all that. Remember the look in my brown eyes, Greg, when you place your hand just there and there. Remember the shape of my breast as I turn to reach some other part of you. Remember. Love my mind, I would think to him, but not only, not only.

And until six months ago, he did.

Now, my daughter and I are talking bran muffins.

"I think Uncle Bud is right," I say to Megan, remembering my brother's dour words on turning fifty. I feel a trickle of moisture run down the side of my face.

"You don't mean that," she counters. Balancing the phone on my shoulder, I've managed to shed most of my clothes now. Soon the sea breeze will come in and blow a little of the heat away.

"I do mean it. Maybe it's all over, like Bud says, and I should learn to knit." Or get a Porsche, I think to myself. Maybe men have the right idea with sports cars as the answer to the mid-life doldrums. And I have a creeping suspicion, rapidly turning into hard-edged certainty, that I might float in the doldrums for a long time to come, that Greg might be the last man to blow wind into my sails. Apparently, even he has come to have second thoughts while I, to my surprise, am coming to love my body more all the time, to cherish the marks of my well-lived life--no scars to speak of, but there is the round softness from two babies, the growing network of fine lines in the usual places and a few that no one warned me about, breasts good but conceding a little more to gravity each year. Marilyn Monroe my mother called me when I was eighteen, a Gauguin painting Greg said one night when I stood in our bedroom wearing only my red lace half slip. I feel a tenderness toward the thighs that were never quite up to Linda Martin's standards and for all the other imperfections that are as familiar to me as the drive from the airport to my cottage here on the shore. I feel fiercely protective, too, not sure I want to put this body that is me under the scrutiny of anyone who might find it lacking. I've stopped wanting it to be something it's not and started wanting a tender eye for it instead. And any woman knows she can never be certain that the phone calls and dinners and dates for the theatre, not even long walks on the shore

and hours of shared confidences, not all those separate moments of pleasure will add up to loving appreciation of her body in the half-light of a cozy bedroom.

"I'm not even sure I want to meet anybody else," I tell Meggy, thinking of a red Porsche. And of Greg.

"Mom," she says with the patience of the young saint she has become at twenty-eight, a mother herself, my grandson a joy to behold in her loving arms. She will remember every detail of his life, I'm sure of it. "Mom, you never know what can happen. Just when you least expect it somebody wonderful will come along."

I like the sound of her words, but why wouldn't I? They're the same ones I said to her when Michael, her husband, backed out of their engagement her sophomore year at college, and she wouldn't leave the house for two weeks.

I hear the baby fussing a little in the background. "Mom," she says, "gotta go. I'll call you Sunday. Love you! Remember--bran muffins. Everybody loves the smell. They're so wholesome!" I groan at this, thinking of the smiling women in the ads for nutritious home-cooked dinners. I myself am hard-pressed to remember the four basic food groups. "No one can resist that smell, Mom! Love you! Bye!"

"Bye, love you, too!" I say fast, trying to get it in before the receiver goes down. I hear a long howl from the baby just as it does. Babies are for the young, I say to myself, and walk barefoot to the kitchen for ice and a touch more Chivas.

I pull the bottle out of the cupboard and pour a little into my glass. I reach to put the bottle back, and I laugh out loud, a small explosion of laughter, when I

see the box of bran muffin mix on the shelf, at the back, next to other things I haven't inspected for a month or two--not since my last spurt of interest in cooking for one, or maybe since Greg left for Florida. There they are, the open package of thin spaghetti noodles half gone, a box of taboule mix, a jar of stuffed olives, the ones he liked with little onions and almonds instead of pimentos. This is ridiculous. For a minute I don't even remember buying the muffin mix, but then I recall the brunch we'd planned for Greg's aging mother the week before she fell on an icy sidewalk on her way to the hair dresser. Greg left for Florida on business two weeks after the funeral and decided to stay for a while to "get some sun and sort things out." He's an attorney who specializes in liability cases. He can afford the time off with what he'll certainly collect for the unfortunately located piece of ice on that sidewalk. He's been sorting for six months now, and I suspect he's getting help from someone, most likely younger than me and more tightly packed. Well, even Gauguin moved on. We've talked, but we haven't said anything important for the last two months. And I've had dinner with a couple of men I know, but I'm not interested and neither are they.

Bran muffins. I remember the stories my grandmother told of the magic charms she and her friends worked to divine their true loves, silly things--a glass of water under the bed, for instance, or letters of the alphabet in a bowl, ashes in which a lover's initials would appear at dawn, salt, feathers. Magic. My favorite was a prophetic inchworm writing the name of a future husband in the dust under the bed. Given my housekeeping, that one has merit if there's an inchworm nearby and it knows how to spell. But there'd been no mention of muffins.

Oh, what the hell, I think, holding my glass in one hand and the red and white box in the other. What else do I have to do tonight? If my Irish daughter thinks muffins will work, I'll make muffins. Then we'll see who knocks on my door.

I put the box on the counter and go to the bedroom to finish changing. Back in the kitchen, my bare feet stick just a little to the linoleum, which has its own layer of sweat waxed on like the glossy floor polish I rarely apply. I sip my Chivas and read the advertising hype on the box--"America's best for more than 20 years!"--then all the ingredients and the lengthy column of nutrition facts. I'm certain that any benefit I reap from this project is going to come from some unexpected guest and not from eating these muffins.

Finally, I read the directions and begin pulling ingredients together--eggs and milk from the refrigerator, oil and vanilla from the cupboard. I wonder about nuts. "Nuts or raisins may be added," the anonymous recipe writer tells me. I push things around on the middle shelf looking for nuts or raisins, but find none. Whoever arrives will have to be satisfied with "plain."

I can't remember how long it's been since I baked, but I do remember to pre-heat the oven. I pull one of my mother's heavy, old red mixing bowls and a glass measuring cup from the cupboard under the silverware drawer. I have never taken great pleasure in the kitchen. Along with Linda Martin's nasty comments in the locker room at James Garfield High, I have unpleasant memories of the home economics class taught by Miss Florence Duff, a maiden lady who took seriously her

assignment to bring fourteen-year-old girls into the realm of homemaking. Miss Duff seemed an unlikely choice for this task, and she was no proponent of joy, cooking or otherwise. My own joy in the kitchen hit its peak when the girls were young, and we made Christmas cookies. Their camels and bells and Santa Clauses were always oddly different from each other--Meggy's perfectly done even when she was small, all the colors correct in smooth, straight lines and Lily's in wild, passionate, exotic patterns, blue-bearded Santas and purple holly.

I begin stirring the ingredients in the bowl--muffin mix, eggs, milk, a dash of oil, vanilla. I add an extra shot of vanilla for no good reason except possibly as a salute to Miss Duff and stop to touch up my Chivas. "Salud, Miss Duff," I think to myself, raising my glass, and then, also for no good reason, I say it out loud to the copper-colored stove. As I do, I see that the little red light has gone off, telling me the oven has reached the desired temperature. At the same time, I realize that I have heated my entire kitchen, and I have to wonder why I have chosen this hot, humid evening to bake, to bring any object in my house up to four hundred degrees. No one bakes in July here, not even with the sea breeze coming in. Not even magic muffins.

The recipe comforts and challenges me at the same time: "Batter will be slightly lumpy," the writer advises. My kind of batter, I think. But then the writer goes on to give me a choice I don't want to have to make in this heat.

"For maximum crown on muffins, let batter rest for three or four minutes before filling cups." Do I want maximum crowns on the muffins, I wonder? I'm

tempted to call Megan and ask her. Do the crowns matter? Damn, I just want to make an ordinary pan of muffins, and now I have these decisions on my head.

If Greg were here, I could ask him. "Greg," I could call out to the living room where he might be watching television or into the backyard where he might be pulling weeds in the perennial bed. "Greg, do you want your muffins with or without a crown?" And he would know. Greg would have an answer about the way they should look. I can only guess now, but since I think he'd want them with crowns, I decide to pour the batter immediately into the cups without waiting. No patience, I say to myself in a voice that sounds like Meggy, no patience and no crowns.

I slide the tin filled with slightly lumpy batter into the hot oven and set the timer for fifteen minutes.

The brick terrace outside the kitchen is beginning to cool, so I pick up my Chivas and the unopened stack of mail and sit in the evening air to wait for muffins. Nothing interesting in the stack--catalogs of things I don't want to buy, bills, appeals from worthy causes that need my support. There's a gaudy postcard from Lily on vacation in Mazatlan--a picture of a bronze young man in the skimpiest of bathing briefs. On the back, in her hand, is the message: "I gave him your phone number! Love, Lily." Then, at the bottom of the stack, like an extra Oreo in the package you thought empty, is a letter from Greg. I hold it in my hand for a full minute before I open it. I count the seconds. It could be anything--good news, bad news, ordinary news about the weather and the Marlins, a chatty kind of letter to a friend. I open it and read to find that he's decided to move to Florida for good, that he likes

the climate, although he always said he loved the summers in Maine, that he hopes I might want to come and visit at some unspecified time, that he will be here this weekend to take care of some business with his mother's estate. He would, if it's not inconvenient--the politeness of this breaking my heart--like to come by and pick up a few things that I've probably forgotten are even here.

I hold the letter in my two hands on my lap, staring at the ivory-colored letterhead from his new office in Miami. He's wrong about forgetting. I know exactly what's here and where it is--his books, a stack of CDs, his green robe behind the bathroom door, and two shirts, one of which I sometimes wear to bed. I've left things where he left them. At least he wrote the letter himself in longhand, in the heavy black strokes of the expensive fountain pen he uses. He made the funny little flourish he does on the "L" of Laura, my name. And he made the same flourish when he signed it "Love," whatever that means. "Love, Greg."

At eight the next morning, Saturday, I'm waiting for the coffee to drip through into the glass pot and staring at the ten remaining bran muffins sitting on one of the Spode plates on the counter. They have not magically arranged themselves in the initials of anybody at all, nor, to my greater disappointment perhaps, have they taken on the configuration of a Porsche. Neither has Greg called, but it's early. I made a dozen muffins and ate two last night, alone as I could very well have predicted. Alone has been my natural state except for the time I spent with my two beautiful daughters and the occasional intervals with their fathers and, later with the second Jack or, mostly, with Greg.

Megan and Lily were born of two different men, neither one of whom I wanted to marry. It was the 60s, and nobody but my parents seemed to mind. Meggy's father, the first Jack, was a musician too old for the draft. He played in the best jazz clubs in the Bay Area until his Irish luck ran out. Lily's father was the handsome Bijan, a Persian student here for his education. He graduated and then stayed in the country to make a small fortune in southern California real estate. Both of them were good men and paid their share for the girls, spent time with them, loved them and made them feel welcome in the world. I raised them. They're my girls, but they are like their fathers, different from each other, showing me the parts of myself, sometimes, that I might have been back then.

The second Jack was the only one of the men I've loved that I took the time to marry. He survived Vietnam, but went down in a helicopter on an aerial shoot over the San Juans two years after our wedding. When everything was over, I ended up with the film and had it developed. For a while, I watched that beautiful footage over and over late at night, by myself in the silence, the lush green, the blues, the tiny islands far below, then the jerkiness as the camera moved, and the odd angle as the chopper began to fall. I always turned it off before the end.

The muffins are sitting on the plate drying up this morning because I didn't care enough to wrap them in plastic. They are not my favorites, crowns or no crowns, although I did eat the two last night. I was morose, I think, disappointed with myself for resorting to hopeful charms like bran muffins, believing for a moment, despite my faith in logic, that someone might come knocking at my door,

preferably Greg. I have to admit, they did smell good, but I also have to admit that I got distracted by the crown business and forgot to grease the muffin cups, so they stuck and are like nothing you'd see in a magazine.

As I stand looking at the ten brown lumps on the plate, the doorbell rings, and my heart jumps.

"No way," I say out loud, surprised to hear the old 60s expression cross my lips. Another jolt from the bell jangles through the house. Greg would call first. I'm almost certain he would. Or use the key he still has if he happened to remember he had it. Whoever is out there means business. I hesitate just a moment and put my hand to my hair without thinking before I open the door. It doesn't matter. It's not Greg. I look down at my young paper boy in his jeans and white T-shirt, the Celtic's leprechaun on it grinning up at me. The boy is fidgeting on the sisal mat and glancing back at one of his friends who's waiting on a bike at the foot of the steps, balancing on the toes of his sneakers to keep the bike from tipping.

"Hello, Teddy," I say.

"Collect," he says firmly with a burst of pre-adolescent enthusiasm. He does mean business.

"Right," I answer. "Just a minute." I don't have enough cash and have to write a check. He shouts something over his shoulder to his friend as he waits for me to finish, but I can't make out what it is. When I hand him the check, he thanks me, hands me a crinkled receipt, and takes the steps two at a time before I can offer him the muffins. He would probably have refused anyway. The good smell is long gone, and boys his age prefer a Big Mac or one of the gooey things from Dunkin

Donuts. Teddy has plenty of time in his life for bran muffins. Receipt in hand, I close the door and lean against it for a moment, not sure whether I'm about to laugh or cry. "Damn!" I whisper. "Damn it, Greg, where are you?" I wore his shirt last night and still have it on under my robe, the long, soft, pale yellow robe he gave me for Christmas.

The muffins have done their magic, I suppose. Somebody *did* come to my door, and maybe it was my fault it was Teddy and not Greg. Maybe the crowns mattered. But the truth is, Meggy and Clifford sold their houses because the right people came along with enough cash and not because of bran muffins. Greg and his mother never got along, and I might have expected that he'd leave as soon as she was no longer here pulling on him. I may have been a cozy long-term comfort, but the truth is, he never wanted anything permanent, and he told me often enough that the Maine winters were too long and cold for him. Florida--or Los Angeles or Phoenix--would have happened sooner or later. He'll call sometime today, and we'll be pleasant to each other while he gathers his things. Maybe something could happen, something good--but there's no point in "maybe." If the "Love, Greg" means anything, he'll say so. If not, then maybe counts for nothing.

Lily is optimistic in Southern California but, unlike Meggy, leaves nothing to luck. She would not have told me bran muffins last night. Lily would have told me, and sometimes does, to buy better mascara and a push-up bra. Lily would send me to a spa and believe I'd come back ten years younger. I want to tell her what happens when a woman passes forty-nine, but I don't want to break her beautiful heart. Megan is the charmed one of us and lovely in her Irish way, but Lily is the

beauty. And smart. Maybe she knows something I don't. And maybe by the time she gets there, miracles will be in place and she will stay young forever. Big news is breaking all the time.

The sun is out this morning, shining through the trees in my backyard, sunlight and shadow in a pattern across the grass. The air is cool, though it will be hot by afternoon. A mockingbird is singing, and the delphinium are a beautiful shade of blue against the gray fence. I stand on the brick terrace in the yellow robe and breathe in the salty air of the Maine coast. I don't agree with Bud that it's over, but I don't agree with Meggy either, about the magic.

I think about taking a drive to Bailey Island to eat fresh shrimp with the lobstermen. I could walk along the rocky shore and look for shells. Perhaps I could be lucky and find something beautiful blown in like the shell Megan still has on her mantle. I wonder for a moment if I should wait for Greg, but I catch myself and think I should go when I'm ready. The machine will pick up his call.

My daughters are out west where they want to be, Greg is moving to Florida, and I am in this place I love. I go inside and pour a cup of strong, dark coffee. I pick up one of the bran muffins and walk back out to the terrace, crumbling the muffin as I go, tossing pieces onto the grass for the birds. I catch myself humming an old tune I cannot name, but one I know I like.